

Interview with Debra Wechter Friedman

for the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society

(Participants: Noel H. Pugach interviews Debra Wechter Friedman)

Noel: Today is February 12, 2018. I'm speaking now to Debra Wechter Friedman, a native of Las Cruces, New Mexico. We will talk about her family, their involvement in the business community in Las Cruces, very significant, and their involvement in the Jewish community there.

Debra: Very significant.

Noel: Very, very significant. They were builders of the synagogue, really, which started from scratch. So, Debra, will you please give me your full name, legal name, your date of birth and your place of birth?

Debra: Debra Ellen Wechter Friedman. I was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico on July 25, 1956.

Noel: And the names of your parents?

Debra: Rose Kellner Wechter and Mark Wechter, although his legal name was Martin Wechter, and there's a funny store with that one.

Noel: Sure, tell us.

Debra: My Zayde worked for 7 years in El Paso to make enough money to bring his wife and two adolescent sons from Russia to America in 1921. A year later my father was born. My two uncles were raised solely by their mother, my Bubba, while their father was in America and were quite unruly and strong willed. When Bubba brought the new baby home from the hospital. She announced to her sons: "here's Martin Wechter. And they say, "We're not going to call him Martin. We're going to call him Marcus." So, his name that he went by was Mark or Marcus, although his legal name was Martin.

Noel: Mm-hm. Okay. What was the level of education for your parents?

Debra: My mother graduated high school early and went to two years of college, and then met my father and married on her 18th birthday. So, by her 18th birthday, she had already finished two years of college. After marrying and purchasing the Music Box business, my mother took several accounting courses so she could keep the books for their new business. My father

studied chemical engineering at UTEP and was one semester shy from graduating before he enlisted in the Navy during WW II. He never really wanted to go into that field but that is what his scholarship was in!

Noel: Which war was it?

Debra: Yeah, it was World War II and he was in the Navy, so he never finished college.

Noel: Okay. Spell the family name, I meant to ask you, because we have a typist doing this and they may not recognize it.

Debra: W-e-c-h-t-e-r.

Noel: Okay. So, tell me about your education.

Debra: Shall I start in Las Cruces including my Jewish education?

Noel: Yes, I mean, first your secular education and then we'll go to your Jewish education.

Debra: Okay. So, I went through high school in Las Cruces, all the grades, and then --

Noel: Las Cruces High School, which was the only one?

Debra: No. Mayfield High School.

Noel: You went to Mayfield?

Debra: Yes. Yes.

Noel: Very good.

Debra: So, Alameda Elementary, Alameda Junior High and Mayfield High school. I went to the University of Arizona and I ended up graduating at the University of Texas in Austin.

Noel: And why did you switch?

Debra: Because I had a bad breakup with a boyfriend at the University of Arizona, and I was emotionally delicate and it was time to make a change. The

University of Texas is where I always wanted to go, so that's where I ended up finishing.

Noel: And what was your major?

Debra: Organizational communications with an emphasis in PR.

Noel: Okay. Well, talk about whether you used that.

Debra: In my business as a real estate broker, absolutely I used it.

Noel: Well, all right, so tell us about your career but first when did you marry and where were you married?

Debra: I married in 1997 to Howard Friedman and we married at the Prairie Star in Bernalillo, New Mexico. And Rabbis Black and Rabbi Celnick performed the marriage. We needed -- it was like a mixed marriage because the Friedmans had been so entrenched in B'nai Zion -- I'm sorry, no, B'nai Israel.

Noel: B'nai Israel.

Debra: B'nai Israel. Howard and I were very comfortable with Rabbi Black. I liked him a lot. I resonated with him. So that is where we ultimately ended up joining and we -- of course, he did the marriage and to keep from showing bias, we asked Rabbi Celnick to be a part of this.

Noel: Okay.

Debra: Yeah, yeah.

Noel: I liked Rabbi Black very much. I thought he was very talented, and I thought he was a good representative of the Jewish community.

Debra: Yes.

Noel: Both of them, Rabbi Celnick, too.

Debra: Yes, yes.

Noel: So, tell me about your career.

Debra: I moved to Albuquerque after graduating from the University of Texas where I had done an internship in real estate development at UT. After college, I was offered a couple jobs. One was with the Marriott Corporation and I don't remember who the other one was with... and I suppose because I grew up in a family that was an entrepreneurial family, a business family the thought of being told specifically what I would do, how much I would make, etc. did not seem appealing to me. I mean, I was an entrepreneur from early, early on. I was buying I mean, I was an entrepreneur from early, early on. I was importing coral and other findings and stuff. I was buying imported coral and other findings and making jewelry and selling them at flea markets and selling the jewelry at flea markets and to sorority sisters in college... that's how I would earn my spending money. And so, the idea of this is how much you will make, just didn't feel right to me, so I did not end up taking that kind of job.

In Albuquerque, I was offered a sales position with Hooten Stahl, which was the leading real estate firm in Albuquerque. I was the youngest associate they had ever taken on & offered to be schooled through their extensive training program. I had that connection because of my uncle an internship, but I was the youngest person accepted with Hooten Stahl, at the time, which was the leading real estate firm in Albuquerque. I was the youngest associate they had ever taken on. I had that connection because my uncle, through marriage, David Steinborn, was in the real estate industry in Las Cruces. So, he made the connection with Bill Hooten up here, and that's how that all happened.

Noel: Okay. And I forgot to ask you if you have siblings?

Debra: Yes, I have three siblings.

Noel: And they are?

Debra: Marcie is the oldest. Marcie White Leff, she goes by that. Frank Wechter, who lives in Albuquerque. And then me, and then Leslie Wechter who lives in Austin, Texas.

Noel: Okay. So, we want to find out as much as we can about your parents, and their role in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Debra: Okay.

Noel: So, when did they come to Las Cruces? You said they had been in El Paso?

Debra: Yes, they had been in El Paso for a very short period of time. As I had mentioned, my mother had married at 18, on her 18th birthday. My father was 21 and at the time he was a record salesperson for Columbia Records. He had travelled the district and one of the places that he would sell to was a very small shop in Las Cruces called The Music Box. The mayor of Las Cruces, Tommy Graham, had recently opened up this small shop, The Music Box.

My father and Mayor Graham got along, and Mayor Graham says, "Would you like to be my partner instead of selling records? So, my Zayde, on my mother's side, lent Mom and Dad the money so Dad could buy into this business and that was in 1948. So, they moved from El Paso to Las Cruces and that was a very good move for my mother because she was no longer with my father's mother and father. That was tough for her.

Noel: Mm-hm. So, you knew both your maternal grandparents and your paternal grandparents?

Debra: Oh yes.

Noel: Very well.

Debra: Big Bubbe and Little Zayde, and Little Bubbe and Big Zayde. El Paso and Galveston. So, my parents moved in 1948. They bought out Mayor Graham, Tommy Graham, in 1949, so they were the sole owners of The Music Box. They took it from being primarily a record shop where one would go in and go pick out the records they wanted to listen to and go in one of the little closed doors with the phonograph and listen, to a full-blown music business.

Noel: We'll say a lot more. Give me the location and were they always in the same location?

Debra: This was on Main Street in Las Cruces and the first building was a very old, old, adobe building, which eventually Dad ended up buying the building next door and making it -- Mom and Dad, and making it larger and then rebuilt, tearing everything down and rebuilding so there was a modern building to what it looks like today, to how it stands today.

Noel: Okay. So, it starts out selling records and sheet music?

Debra: Just records, I think.

Noel: Just records?

Debra: Yeah. I mean, just a little rinky dink --

Noel: -- and then it grows to something big?

Debra: It grew into something more.

Noel: So, tell me about it, who had the imagination, the ideas, all that?

Debra: Completely my father. My mother was the bookkeeper. My mother was the keeper of the checkbooks. My mother was the grounded one when it came to the finances. Typical Jewish woman, it sounds like.

My father was the dreamer and he and my mom, clearly as partners, built a wonderful music business that, by the time they sold to my brother-in-law and sister, had some of the finest European strings from Italy, from Germany. Pianos, grand pianos, different kinds of grand pianos from Asian, German, American. All kinds of instruments, all kinds of music. No longer records, never records.

Noel: They gave that up completely?

Debra: Oh, absolutely. I mean, they wanted a true music business.

Noel: All right and the name was The Music Box?

Debra: The Music Box.

Noel: And they inherited that name from Graham?

Debra: Yes. Yes. And today, it is White's Music Box.

Noel: All right. Well, we'll find out about Mr. White.

Debra: Okay.

Noel: Or Mrs. White. Okay. So, when does it really take off? When does it become this music emporium, shall I say?

Debra: It was a musical emporium, that's exactly what it was.

Noel: Featuring instruments rather than records?

Debra: I'll have to ask my sister on that one. I don't know. I was the third child. I don't know. But she would know that.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Debra: Or certainly my brother-in-law would know that.

Noel: Was there a plan? Or it just kept growing organically?

Debra: I think it just grew organically, and it was the dream of my dad because he loved music. Loved music. There was always music in our home.

Noel: Did he play an instrument?

Debra: He had -- no. He had dreams of conducting. One day, I walk into our house and he has a Beethoven symphony on, very loud, and he's standing in front of a large mirror in the foyer, and he's conducting. Then he always said that if he were to die and come back, that he would be a violinist. But at the time, the instrument that he was playing was the cash register.

Noel: Okay. It has a nice tinkle. Doesn't it?

Debra: It kept food on the table and sent four kids to college.

Noel: So, you'll find out exactly when this really takes off. I understand --

Debra: Your pen fell.

Noel: Oh, sorry. I understand that he established a relationship with the schools and their music programs. Can you comment on that?

Debra: How did you find out about this stuff?

Noel: I interviewed you on the phone briefly.

Debra: You interviewed me?

Noel: Yeah. I spoke to you on the phone when I was getting the information, so I could apply for the grant.

Debra: Oh, okay.

Noel: You don't remember that?

Debra: My father formed very, very strong relationships with all of the band and instrument leaders, and orchestra leaders in Albuquerque. I'm sorry, in Las Cruces and all the areas around Ruidoso. I mean, my father was always travelling to all of these small schools, Tucumcari. I mean, just setting up relationships all over southern New Mexico. And, some of their really good friends, besides the ones in the Jewish community, were the band leaders and musical leaders and chorus leaders and such in the music industry. Every year, they would have a very large bash for the music teachers to thank them and that was always very much anticipated and looked forward to. Mom would put so much time into planning it and decorating and it was a very successful large community, because these were the people that supported the Music Box. So, Dad took very, very good care of them.

Noel: As he expanded, did he have to go out and get more capital? Or --

Debra: Yes. Oh, yes.

Noel: So, tell me about it. Did he?

Debra: Zayde and Bubbe were very, very generous.

Noel: Now you're talking about his mother?

Debra: My mother's parents were very, very, very generous. They helped us in so many ways and that certainly was a part of The Music Box's ability to grow and grow and grow. Then, there were, of course, bank loans and such.

Noel: Well, you carry inventory.

Debra: Absolutely.

Noel: And you got to pay it out of rent or even 90 days -- they would have --

Debra: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Noel: Tell me about this.

Debra: Dad had really strong relationships with several of the bankers that he would -- that they would help him for so many years, and some of these

people were some of his really close friends. I mean, the Las Cruces business community was very tight at the time. Very tight.

Noel: Tell me about that.

Debra: Well, I can tell you about primarily the Jewish merchants all along Main Street were so cohesive. Even before the Sisterhood was formed, which was in 1956, or '55, and before Sunday School started, the Jewish community in Albuquerque started as a social gathering.

Noel: Do you mean the Jewish community in Las Cruces?

Debra: What did I say?

Noel: Albuquerque.

Debra: Sorry. In Las Cruces, where these Jewish businessmen and wives, business people would all get together. I mean they were all in the same place. There were very few Jews, and they were just really tight together. For instance, the Druxmans, Jay and Sis Druxman, who had their business across the street from -- across the street and a little bit down, on Main Street. The Kleins, Howard Klein and Bea Klein, Las Cruces Furniture. The Glucks.

Noel: What did they do?

Debra: They were in clothing, they were in shmattos, yeah. They were in the shmatto business. Yeah. So, that's how this nucleus started, and there was awareness amongst these businesspeople that when somebody new came into town, you took them under your wing. And so, for instance, when my brother-in-law, Mike White, came into town to go to New Mexico State University, on a music scholarship, he was very close friends with the Druxmans and with the Kleins and then ultimately ended up getting a job with my father and mother at The Music Box and ultimately ended up marrying my older sister.

Noel: Now, who is this?

Debra: Marcie. Marcie White Leff married Michael White.

Noel: Okay, all right. Now I understand.

Debra: Okay.

Noel: But wait a second. You said...

Debra: They're no longer married.

Noel: But you said, your brother?

Debra: No.

Noel: Who is that? That you just talked about?

Debra: My sister.

Noel: Yeah.

Debra: Married Mike White.

Noel: Oh, Mike Weiss.

Debra: White. A Jewish kid.

Noel: White.

Debra: From Brookline, Massachusetts. He got a scholarship at NMSU, and ended up connecting first with the Kleins and the Druxmans. Then they, of course, introduced Mike White to my father. He ultimately ended up working for my father, marrying my sister and now he's the owner of White's Music Box.

Noel: Okay.

Debra: I mean, really tight. Yeah.

Noel: Yes. So, you said your father was involved with some of the business organizations, Civitan, Chamber of Commerce?

Debra: Chamber of Commerce, yes, and he was most active in the Las Cruces Community Concerts.

Noel: Oh, first, let's stick to the business.

Debra: Okay.

Noel: Was he involved with the, you know, the Elks or ... ? So, he wasn't involved with Civitan, he wasn't involved?

Debra: His life was music.

Noel: Music? All right.

Debra: His passion was music, and the Jewish community. Those were the two areas where he was most involved. So, when I tell you about the Las Cruces Community Concert organization, this was an organization that brought in travelling musicians. For instance, Maria Von Trapp, was in our home. Beverly Sills was in our home. He was the stage manager at all of these concerts, so he would do everything behind the scenes besides selling tickets at The Music Box and then we would entertain all the people and he would -- we would bring -- he and my mom would bring the people in. So, this was a passion, and this is what they did in our community.

Noel: Was he involved in politics at all?

Debra: No. Just my uncle by marriage, David Steinborn, and now my cousin, his son, Jeffrey Steinborn, were the politicians in our family.

Noel: So, okay. Because I know Sam Klein was mayor?

Debra: Yes.

Noel: Of Las Cruces for many years.

Debra: Yes, yes.

Noel: Like, three or four terms?

Debra: Yes, yes.

Noel: And but he, your dad, did not get involved?

Debra: Not that I recall.

Noel: Was he a Democrat or a Republican?

Debra: He was a registered Democrat.

Noel: Okay. Your mother also?

Debra: Registered Democrat.

Noel: Okay. Howard's family was split, he told me.

Debra: Yes, they were a mixed marriage.

Noel: Mixed marriage?

Debra: Yes.

Noel: Okay. So, tell me a little more about this involvement with the community music scene. Did he recruit these artists?

Debra: Yes. Not only did he recruit guest artists for this Las Cruces Community Concert organization, bring them in. To give you an example, I remember he had -- who was the trumpeter who used to play? I mean, the band leader with Johnny Carson?

Noel: Doc Severinsen.

Debra: Yes, Doc Severinsen. He brought in Doc Seversinsen and arranged lodging, transportation, etc. Dad became very friendly with Doc Severinsen, which he did with all of the artists because he was the one that recruited everybody. I remember Dad saying that he took Doc Severinsen to his favorite Mexican restaurant, and said, "Doc, be careful with this, and when you eat the chili, you cannot touch. You cannot have the chili touch your lips because it will burn your lips and it will affect the sensitivity when you're playing the horn." So that was a funny -- that was a very funny -- that was really funny. That was very cute.

Noel: So.

Debra: Excuse me just a minute.

Noel: If you want me to stop --

Debra: Go ahead, go ahead.

Noel: So, tell me a little bit about David Steinborn.

Debra: David was married to my mother's sister, Ruth. Ruth Kellner Steinborn. They moved from Tucson to Las Cruces. They opened up the Del Prado --

they bought the Del Prado Motel. While they were hotel liaises, that's a very fancy word for not such a fancy hotel -- motel, they had one or two children and Dave Steinborn got his, excuse me, his real estate license. And they eventually sold that and --

Noel: Sold the motel?

Debra: Sold the motel and Dave started being a real estate broker. And grew the business and grew the business and grew the business and was involved in every sort of political avenue and every sort of committee. Always, always, always, always busy. With five kids, he was always, always, always gone. Always out of town. Building business and building his reputation as a strong connected politician. Was the mayor of Las Cruces, on all sorts of committees, appointed by the different governors, primarily in reference to the land development and real estate. Large developer of Sonoma Ranch, in Las Cruces. He and my aunt divorced and he's no longer with us. He passed a couple years ago.

Noel: His son also got into it?

Debra: Oh yeah, Jeff. Jeff is in the state legislature, carrying on the passion. Yes.

Noel: I once interviewed a Steinborn.

Debra: Which one?

Noel: The father. A number of years ago.

Debra: Mm-hm.

Noel: Well, anything else you want to say about that? The business part of it? Before I turn to the Jewish part?

Debra: I could remember Dad involved in so many different committees and they were primarily business committees. And dealing with the -- with downtown Main Street. That's what I remember.

Noel: If you think of something --

Debra: I will.

Noel: Think about it.

Debra: Yeah, I will.

Noel: Okay. Let's turn to their great involvement, your parents, in the Jewish community. So, when does it begin? How does it begin? Where do you want to start?

Debra: My gosh. I'm referring to my -- what I wrote and the presentation that I gave at the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society. I think what is most important is the awareness and the realization that not one or two or three people were the beginners or were the genesis of the Jewish -- of the Las Cruces Jewish community. That's why I brought up earlier how all of this basically started as a social gathering. The social coming together primarily with, in the business community.

Sis Druxman, who I was a presenter with, who was one of my mother's best friends, dearest friends, and I grew up -- all the Druxman kids and Wechter kids grew up together, filled in the holes for me, because clearly, I wasn't even alive then. But she would say, basically what would happen is that all the Jewish business people would get together and for different holidays, Bea Klein, who was Sam Klein's wife, who was the Mayor, would call and have everybody over for whatever holiday.

At that time, if you wanted to be at all observant, or attend any kind of service, you had to go to El Paso. My father was from El Paso, went to Hebrew school, went all the way through Cheder, did all of that in El Paso. He got an excellent, excellent Jewish education, so he was still very attached, both emotionally and with other people in the El Paso community. But let's get back, I digress. Let's get back to Bea Klein and the gatherings. So that's how that started.

At the same time that all the businesspeople were getting together, the scientists that had been brought in for White Sands Missile Range, were also getting together in the early 1950s. It seemed like, at the same time, two different groups that were not communicating very much, both had realizations at the same time, that we need organization. We need a way to educate our kids. We need to get together. We need to band together in this small little town called Las Cruces.

So, in the early 1950s, -- let's see, Frances Williams and the Traftons helped form the first Sunday school in 1954. Shortly thereafter, the Yalkuts, Sis Druxman, Bea Klein, Belle and Abe Pearlman and Mark and Rose Wechter became involved with the Sunday school. Because of my father's upbringing, and Jewish Hebrew education at Congregation at B'nai Zion in

El Paso, he was considered a valuable resource for the fledgling school. According to Sis Druxman, my father was the go-to person for religious education, not only as a teacher, but for guidance as well. Mike White, my brother-in-law -- who was not my brother in law at the time -- he was just a young kid in his twenties, and Jeanette Modern were Sunday school teachers, among others.

Noel: So, the -- you have the social organization. Then they start thinking about the kids and their Jewish education?

Debra: Yes. Yes.

Noel: All right.

Debra: So, you haven't asked me a really obvious question. Where did they have Sunday school?

Noel: Oh, they had it at the Episcopalian church?

Debra: They had it at very -- at various locations including the Elks Lodge, the Unitarian church, and in empty rooms in the Gene Stern building. Gene Stern was -- the Sterns were some of the early settlers.

Noel: Okay.

Debra: My sister, Marcie White Leff, recalls Sunday school also met in the Legion Hall on Main Street, which was a couple doors down from my parents' business, The Music Box. My father and sister would arrive early on Sunday mornings to pick up empty beer bottles and cigarette butts, from the night before and clean up the rest -- and clean up before the students and teachers would arrive. Only in a small town would that happen. Marcie also remembers Sis Druxman and our mother being around Sunday school a lot and handing out little favors to the kids after school was out. So, it's like making their experience a sweet one.

Noel: Right.

Debra: Apparently, there was an organization that was formed by the two organizations, the social organization of the business people and the scientists at White Sands, and they formed the Las Cruces Jewish community -- Las Cruces Jewish Community Inc. I don't know anything about this except this was formed before Temple Beth-El even --

Noel: What was its purpose?

Debra: To... with the idea that they needed further organization, and that a temple would be forthcoming.

Noel: All right, I have two questions for you. One, I wanted to ask you, was there anyone from the university in this community?

Debra: Yes.

Noel: -- who also was significant?

Debra: Yes. In 1956, Dr. Max Kramer, a math professor at New Mexico State, was the leading force in calling the Jews in the community together to form a congregation. That's probably when Las Cruces Jewish Community Inc. was formed. Their first meeting was on campus. Then religious services. Religious services. See, we hadn't even mentioned that before.

Noel: Well, I was going to get to that.

Debra: Were held at the Gene Stern building, the WIA Hall, the Unitarian Church, the Lions Club and finally Thomas Branigan Public Library. They were saying, and I'm saying public library. What happens to separation of church and state? Well, when you have Max -- Sam Klein as the mayor, this made it happen. My sister remembers going into the little Thomas Branigan back room, where they would have services. Dr. Kramer was the first president of the congregation and he also led the first services. Services were held 52 years -- 52 weeks/year, minyan or not.

Noel: Did they first have High Holiday services?

Debra: What do you mean, first? Before services?

Noel: Before they had weekly services?

Debra: No.

Noel: Well, that's very interesting.

Debra: I don't think so.

Noel: Because generally, small Jewish communities, they start out by "Oh, we've got to have Rosh Hashanah services. We got to have Yom Kippur."

Debra: I think, at that time, because like as I had mentioned, sometimes there was not even a minyan. I think people were still going to El Paso for that. Once a month, the services were held at White Sands Missile Range, officiated by Lou Levy, who was a Chaplain's Assistant and Army private. Learned volunteers and other military people also led services.

Noel: All right. My other question was, was there simultaneously, earlier, anything approaching a Jewish Federation?

Debra: No. Although, no. Although I do remember in reference to federation, the only thing I remember is my father working very, very hard on the UJA drive and coming home sometimes so unnerved and stressed because people were not giving or people that he felt could and should give much, much more were not giving. So that was a memory I have.

Noel: Okay. All right. Were your parents Zionists? And was there a strong flavor of Zionism in Las Cruces? Because in El Paso, there was, as far as I know. Maybe stronger than in Albuquerque. But, certainly not for many years at the Reform congregation but at B'nai Israel here, they were Zionists. Were your parents involved in Zionism at all?

Debra: Except -- you know, no, except for working really hard on the UJA drive for years and years and years, which so much of it went to Israel...

Noel: Did they talk Israel? You know, was it a major subject?

Debra: No, no, it was not a major subject. It was not a major subject that I can recall. I'll speak with my sister but --

Noel: See if she remembers.

Debra: Yes.

Noel: The other thing is, did your family -- you were born in '56?

Debra: Yes.

Noel: So maybe -- did your parents talk at all, when you were growing up, about the Holocaust? Did you become aware of the Holocaust?

Debra: Oh yes, yes, yes, yes.

Noel: How? From whom?

Debra: My parents and my grandparents. And I remember my mother telling me a story that one day, she came home to her home in Galveston, and my grandfather was crying. He had just learned that an entire branch of his family had perished.

Noel: Right. Yeah.

Debra: Consequently, my grandfather became a humanist Jew. He wrestled so much with God's existence that he had a hard, hard, hard, hard time with that. I remember growing up and thinking how can Zayde not believe in God? But then, my mother would always say, "God works ..."

Noel: In mysterious ways.

Debra: And how you have to look at not what Zayde believes but how Zayde lives his Judaism, and how Zayde is one of the sweetest, most generous, wonderful, giving men on the earth. So, I had that early, early awareness of not being able to understand that. My grandparents, especially my mother's parents, talked a lot about Israel and did a lot about awareness for Israel and raising money for Israel.

Noel: Okay. Raising money, but did it go beyond? Political support for Israel? Were they in touch with their congressman, senator?

Debra: You're talking about my parents?

Noel: Your parents.

Debra: I don't recall but then again I was really --

Noel: -- young.

Debra: Young. I don't recall. My sister might remember that.

Noel: Ask her -- these are things that I am interested in, that I ask everyone. I ask everyone I've interviewed about their connection with Zionism and coming to the conclusion that except for nominal contributions to Israel, there wasn't a feeling. What's the turning point? And so, my next question was, in Las Cruces -- now you were too young, I realize, to know -- but the impact of the Six Day War?

Debra: I can't address that.

Noel: Maybe your sister -- which, how old is your older sister?

Debra: She's six years older than I. She'd be able to address that.

Noel: I mean, that had a tremendous impact, I know, on Albuquerque. Six Day War, my God, you know? They were all meeting together, planning, writing to our congressmen, senators, besides raising money. I mean, of course there was fundraising, but political activity. I'm interested in defining political activity.

I was on the Israel Task Force for many, many years, and I was a strong supporter of Israel and somewhat of an activist. I remember working with a lot of people in Albuquerque during Six Day War [Yom Kippur War], and then they -- the people were wild. What was the impact in Las Cruces on the young people?

Debra: I can't address that.

Noel: That's just a big --

Debra: Can't address it.

Noel: Huh?

Debra: Can't address it.

Noel: Okay. This, I use these as indices for commitment to Israel and attention to Israel. Did you parents visit Israel?

Debra: No.

Noel: I know you did. You have.

Debra: Yes.

Noel: I know you and Howard did.

Debra: No, Howard and I have never gone together.

Noel: Oh? Separately.

Debra: Yeah.

Noel: Before you were married?

Debra: Yes.

Noel: Okay.

Debra: And actually, we wanted to go in April with Rabbi Rosenfeld and Paul Citrin, but it turns out our nephew is becoming a bar mitzvah during that time, so we can't go. But that was the plan.

Noel: Yeah, okay. When did a Jewish cemetery or section in the cemetery begin? Before or after the congregation was organized?

Debra: After, and that was primarily Jay Druxman who was a president of Temple Beth-El at the time, and he ended up making arrangements with the Masonic Cemetery down in Las Cruces. He had brought it up to the board, but the board didn't act on it, so it turns out that he wrote a check himself because he realized the importance of having a cemetery and then a couple years later, he was reimbursed by the board.

Noel: As [unintelligible]? said, first --

Debra: Yeah, first you do a cemetery. Well, that didn't happen. But what did happen, prior to Dr. Max Kramer getting everybody together, calling the Jews in the community together to form a congregation, the Sisterhood originally formed in 1955. Their idea was to work diligently, of course, not only to educate the children, but to raise the funds necessary to purchase a Torah. So even before the university and all the other forces came together, the women came together and said, "We see what is coming, what we would like in the future. And we need to help make it happen." So, in order to do that, they would have rummage sales and bake sales, et cetera. And in 19 -- let's see, my father purchased the Torah in Los Angeles and dedicated it on September 1, 1956, at the Branigan Public Library Auditorium.

Noel: That is funny.

Debra: Is that a hoot?

Noel: That is a hoot.

Debra: Rabbi Renov of B'nai Zion in El Paso officiated. Rabbi Floyd Fierman of Temple Mount Sinai also attended.

Noel: Well --

Debra: So that was before we had a temple.

Noel: So tell me about how the push.

Debra: In 1961, the leadership of Iz Goldstein, the board members along with other original members of the congregation voted to put up their own building. So enough of meeting at the public library, enough of having the kids in Sunday school at different places, it was time to get our own building.

Noel: How many families were then involved in the Jewish community? By the way, who is Mr. Goldstein?

Debra: I don't know.

Noel: Well, fair enough.

Debra: I don't know.

Noel: All right.

Debra: And I don't know how many people. I can tell you the influential people.

Noel: Okay.

Debra: Is that what you want to know?

Noel: Yeah, let me know.

Debra: Okay, the Kleins, the Druxmans. Frances Williams. The Traftons, Iz Goldstein.

Noel: How do you spell Trafton?

Debra: T-r-a-f-t-o-n. The Ysalkuts Mike White. The Moderns, the Pearlmans.

Noel: Were all of these business people?

Debra: No. No. They weren't. They were --

Noel: Scientists?

Debra: They were university scientists and business people.

Noel: Alamogordo? White Sands?

Debra: Yes.

Noel: Yeah, okay.

Debra: The Glucks. The interesting thing was they needed money and how do you raise money, from the very beginning. So, efforts to raise money included rummage sales, bake sales, large community-based delicatessen dinners, which my mother was an integral part of the delicatessen dinner.

The biggest deal in Las Cruces at that time was our annual deli dinner. My mother would go around to all of her music friends, all of the band leaders and their wives, and always sell tickets. You have to buy a ticket to the Deli Dinner. My mother was always the biggest saleswoman and promoter for the Deli Dinner.

So, the Deli Dinner was held at Las Cruces High School. Kosher meat from El Paso, kosher butchers, Alex and Doris Gluck were brought in. Bea Klein and Sis Druxman made cole slaw. Every single person helped, including me. I was a young squirt at the time, but I was going around, and I was cleaning off tables and all the Sunday school kids were cleaning off tables. Everybody was involved. This was a cohesive act and my mother was the top saleswoman, throughout the larger Las Cruces community and large amounts of money were raised for several years with this specific event. With the idea that this is how we're going to build our temple.

My father was in charge of fundraising for the entire building project. Because our community was so small, even though there were several generous donors, Dad had to reach out to the El Paso community. This is the part that grips me. He wrote 1,262 letters to members of B'nai Zion, and Temple Mount Sinai. He hand wrote.

Ninety percent of the donations came from Temple Mount Sinai members so that was the Reform congregation which is interesting. Dad said it was not the wealthy who donated. He would receive \$5 one month and \$15 the next month from individuals. He was quoted as saying, "It was a joy to receive these small amounts monthly."

Noel: That's great.

Debra: Yeah. Eventually the congregation purchased land on Parker Road where the building still remains. But the old building, but at this point, I think a black Baptist congregation bought where we originally were. And so, finally there was enough money to buy a pre-constructed -- Bains building. And that was put up, one large room with a tiny kitchenette housed our small community. The ark was brought from the Branigan Public Library, Bema chairs along with the eternal lamp, the ner tamid, came from the old temple, Mount Sinai, and folding chairs were purchased. Temple Beth-El came into being.

Noel: What year?

Debra: 1961.

Noel: Okay. Did they have a rabbi?

Debra: Rabbi Renov from B'nai Zion was the officiating rabbi because my father, oh, this was, I'm sorry. This was when it was first built, so he was the officiating rabbi because my father's allegiance was still with the Conservative shul, even though the majority of funds came from the generous folks at the Reform temple. Rabbi Fierman of Temple Mount Sinai and my father formed a special bond. Rabbi Fierman saw to it that prayer books were donated for our new temple.

Oh, here's the information on the cemetery. So, when Jay Druxman was the president, he arranged to purchase 40 burial plots at \$140 each from the Masonic Lodge. Sis remembers her husband writing the check for the \$2,000 down payment out of their personal funds to make this happen. The board approved the purchase and payments three years later in 1971.

Did they have a rabbi? No, they didn't have a rabbi, but different rabbis would come and go.

Noel: Yeah, okay.

Debra: And I --

Noel: No, I wanted to know -- when did they first get all these -- often, a temporary rabbi came through as part of his training with the college or JTS. Sure.

Debra: I'm sorry, the new structure was dedicated on May 27, 1962. In reference to the rabbis, I can read another article that I have but I can't answer that at this point. So, at the time my father was, as I mentioned, he was the go-to for everything religious. He was the lay rabbi during the High Holy days and the lay cantor. He would lead the services in this Reform congregation with conservative prayer books, because that's how he grew up, so it was a real juxtaposition.

One of my fondest memories is hearing my father sing Kol Nidre. When I was growing up, Dad would be in our home and he would have the phonograph with Perry Como singing Kol Nidre and he would be practicing Kol Nidre. I'd walk into the room and he was so serious, and this is what he was doing. This was for many, many, many years. At that point, people were coming in from all the little towns, all little mining towns, all over from southern New Mexico to attend High Holy services at Temple Beth-El. And so, my father was the guy. To this day, I have, for instance, Sis Druxman says to me, when we both attend services at Congregation Albert, she says, "I still think of your father singing Kol Nidre and no one sings like him." That is amazing.

Noel: So, when did Beth-El get its first full time rabbi?

Debra: I have to get back with you on that.

Noel: All right. Please do. All right. I want to know that. How, why, did Beth-El affiliate with the Reform Movement? If you can find that out. What can you say, or find out? You can think about this one. The kind of -- once the synagogue is old enough. All right, you have a formal synagogue.

Debra: You mean the building?

Noel: Yeah, the building. Did it retain the original spirit of these families who really wanted something for their kids?

Debra: Yes, and I can speak to that.

Noel: Go ahead.

Debra: Yes. There was such, -- so I think you can hear from the early beginnings, , that people had to work so closely together on everything to make this come together. It still remains small and it still remained -- the whole community participation still remained an integral part of keeping Temple

Beth-El together. The raising of the children and the educating of the children and the Sisterhood. The place that Temple Beth-El had within the greater community which I'd like to address because it was an important part of Las Cruces.

Noel: Well, you want to do it now?

Debra: Yes, yes. For instance, my mother came up with the idea to have, for a fundraiser, to have a big gala and this gala was very posh. Beautiful thing where elegant gourmet food would be held, in someone's beautiful, gorgeous house. So, people who had just -- who were well off and had beautiful homes, would host these galas. There would be music and there would be wonderful food and all of the members of, not only the Jewish community, but the entire community would come. They would pay a large amount of money to be a part of this party. That was a very large fundraiser. My mom not only put this together but had it at their house several times. So that was always looked forward to, as was the whole Deli Dinner in Las Cruces.

I mean, you have to remember, Las Cruces was such a small city, town. So, a town of maybe 30,000 - 40,000 in the '60s where you have food come in that no one has ever tasted? Kosher food? Pastrami, potato salad, corned beef? No one's ever had this before. This was a really exotic experience, so it gave a really interesting flavor and a very -- a richer flavor for the entire town.

Noel: Okay.

Debra: What other questions?

Noel: Well, let me review it and I will probably come up with some more.

Debra: I know you will.

Noel: Yeah, let me think about it. We covered a lot of good ground. Thank you, Debra. Really. A good reporting. You are a good reporter. I've asked you some questions, if you can get the answers to them. Do you know how many members Beth-El has now?

Debra: I haven't a clue.

Noel: See if you can find out.

Debra: I will say that as far as family involvement, not only was it my mother and father's involvement but you will see stained glass windows that were donated by my Bubbe and Zayde Kellner from Galveston that were in the old temple that are now in the new temple and there is a whole wing. In fact, David Steinborn was one of the major -- David and Vivian Steinborn were one of the major organizers and supporters of the new Temple Beth-El. In fact, David and Vivian donated the land on which the Temple Beth-El is built. There's a whole wing dedicated to my cousins, the Steinborn kids. The whole educational wing, by David and Vivian. So, how many members?

Noel: Yeah, find out how many members. I will --

Debra: One other thing that was interesting was how Temple Beth-El grew and of course, my father being brought up in a Conservative environment, did not have any awareness or desire to allow girls to become bat mitzvahs. And so, through Francis Williams, who was quite a strong advocate for women, and still is, she brought that idea to Dad. I supposed the board voted on it, and I became a bat mitzvah. My sister became a bat mitzvah. My other sister became a bat mitzvah. So, we changed the flavor of the Las Cruces Jewish community, yeah.

Noel: Very good. Is there a separate wing of the -- does the community have its own federation?

Debra: I don't think so. I don't know but I don't think so.

Noel: Yeah, find out. Because that's some of -- I know the Jewish Federation here has been doing a very good job of reaching out. And now, it, you know, embraces the state.

Debra: Yeah.

Noel: It's the Jewish Federation of New Mexico and not Albuquerque, and it's concerned about the small communities like Las Cruces and even Roswell.

Debra: I want to bring up another funny story. As we're talking, these funny stories come to mind. My sister remembers a time when during some High Holiday services, when there was no one to blow the shofar, so my father had a recording of the shofar. It was behind -- it was like Oz behind the curtain. And so, there was, I guess, maybe with the cassette, and he would hit so a shofar blast would go off, because there was no one to blow one.

Noel: Well.

Debra: Small, small, small community.

Noel: That's right.

Debra: I mean, I can also --

Noel: They struggle.

Debra: -- talk about Sukkot and what they did and Shavuot, I mean, funny things, and how my mother and Sis Druxman would go around to the different grocery stores. Maybe there were two of them there? They would ask the produce managers for the wooden crates. The fruit crates, so they could take as many as possible so they could build a sukka with those, and then go and get -- and then hanging from the roof were cotton balls because Las Cruces, all of the --]recording cuts off]

Noel: Today is May 15, 2018. I am resuming the interview with Debra Wechter Friedman. I sent her some questions because we knew there were gaps and she was going to check with her older sister. She's a youngster, of course. And so, if you want to go in the order of the questions I asked you? I know one thing you were going to talk about -- when the business really took off? When did The Music Box really take off?

Debra: My parents bought The Music Box from Tommy Graham, who was the owner of the mortuary in Las Cruces in 1948. My dad had been a travelling salesman with Columbia Records. Mom did not want him on the road so much, so this opportunity came up and with my Zayde's help, his father-in-law's help, they bought The Music Box in 1948.

Also, Dad went into partnership with Tommy Graham and opened an appliance store across the street from The Music Box, named Gramark. Gra, G-r-a- for Graham and Mark for Mark Wechter. It had appliances, stereos.

After Gramark closed, Dad continued selling stereos at The Music Box. The store gradually grew both in size and stock, selling pianos and organs as well as starting to sell musical instruments and supplies. In the early 60s, Dad started importing both instruments and musical accessories from Europe, through a man named Mr. Voss. About 1965, Dad and Mom opened Southwest Imports and began directly importing really fine stringed

instruments as well as oboes and bassoons from Europe. My dad and my ex-brother in law -- should I say ex brother-in-law?

Noel: It's okay. It's on the...

Debra: Mike White went to Europe several times and developed these relationships with the string makers.

Noel: Where? In Italy?

Debra: In Germany.

Noel: Germany.

Debra: Because Dad's first language was Yiddish, he spoke Yiddish and so he was able to communicate with the violin makers. To this day, I am now personally forming a relationship with a string professor in Tucson who Dad befriended, and this string professor told Dad specifically, "This is what, if you're having instruments made, this is what would constitute a really excellent viola or violin." So, Mr. Sandner in Germany and his sons would make Dad's string instruments to the specifications of this specific string professor.

Noel: Could you spell that name?

Debra: Oh, Sandner. S-a-n-d-n-e-r.

Noel: Okay. For the sake of our transcriptionist.

Debra: Yeah. Yeah. And so, now, I have a handful of instruments still left and so I have been in contact with Dennis Bourret, the string professor in Tucson, who wants to buy them. These are the last of my dad's instruments.

Noel: They are really good quality?

Debra: Excellent quality. Excellent quality, yeah. So, originally The Music Box started with selling records. Again, that's -- Dad used to be a salesman with Columbia. So, my sister said they stopped selling records when Kmart could sell them for less than Mom and Dad could buy them for. So...

Noel: Okay. You want to go onto the other, or do you maybe have more to say on this? I don't want to cut you off.

Debra: I think last time I brought up my Dad's involvement in bringing music, classical music to Las Cruces and how he -- how involved he was with the community concert series. The tickets were sold at The Music Box and Dad served as the stagehand, chauffeur and anything else that was required by the travelling artists. He would also go and tape all of the local school orchestra and band concerts. Also, took care of the music for the local ballet dance teacher and her dance studio. Anything with music in town had Mark Wechter's involvement including wiring downtown with Christmas carols during the holidays.

Noel: That's cute.

Debra: So, in reference to your question about Zionism and Israel, all my sister could remember is Dad's extreme involvement with the -- the one that -- Howard, help me. They raised money for Israel.

Noel: UJA?

Debra: Yes, UJA.

Noel: United Jewish Appeal.

Debra: Yes, UJA. He would come home and be very frustrated because he would say such and such can afford so much more, and they were such -- they were so cheap. They didn't give. I think we've all had that situation.

Noel: Oh, yes.

Debra: I mean, because I actually did UJA raising money at the University of Texas as a student. So, I would remember what my dad would say after he would come home and be frustrated. Let me see ...

Political activity, contacting congressmen. My sister didn't remember any of that.

Noel: Well, especially for pro-Israel lobbying --

Debra: He didn't -- she didn't remember anything.

Noel: Okay.

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Debra: Community's reaction to the Six Day War, Yom Kippur War. One thing that Marcy remembers was the Yom Kippur War, that she was in temple

and people had transistor radios with the ear plugs in their ears and keep the radios on during services to be in touch with what was going on.

Noel: I know, we took breaks and some people brought radios.

Debra: Yeah.

Noel: We would just find out the latest.

Debra: Yeah. And I don't know if I talked about this previously, in reference to Temple Beth-El. In the first expansion of Temple Beth-El, my Bubbe and Zayde, which were my mother Rose's, Rose Kellner Wechter's, parents, gave the money for the stained-glass windows up near the bima. Those stained-glass windows have been moved to the temple. The new temple in Las Cruces now. And Temple --

Noel: Is there any indication, a plaque, that they gave it?

Debra: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And Temple Beth-El's first Torah, I don't know if I talked about that, but clearly, it's important. The Sisterhood, the fledgling Sisterhood, raised the money for the Torah and Dad went to LA to pick up the Torah. The second Torah was a gift facilitated by Mike White, who's my previous brother-in-law, the now owner of The Music Box. So, you see the continuation. There was a shul that was closing in Boston and Temple Beth-El became the recipient of the Torah. Mike was from Boston and so, he facilitated this.

Judy and Seymour Schiff, who are his sister and brother-in-law, Mike's sister and brother-in-law, and Ruth White, his mother, contributed the silver crown and breast plate. So, now, Temple Beth-El became a two Torah temple. That silver crown and breast plate are still, I was there last year -- that's what is being used now. Both Mom and Dad were president of the Temple Sisterhood, the temple board respectively and Dad, as you already know, acted as the lay rabbi and cantor until the rabbi was hired.

Noel: Fine, okay.

[end of recording]