

Oral History of Elizabeth Sarah (“Sally”) Gere

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewer is Barbara Kagan, and the interviewee is Elizabeth Sarah Gere. The interview took place on Monday, December 9, 2019. This is the first interview.

MS. KAGAN: Good afternoon.

MS. GERE: Good afternoon, Barbara.

MS. KAGAN: My first question is how would you like to be addressed?

MS. GERE: Sally.

MS. KAGAN: Okay. So that begs the question, why Sally?

MS. GERE: Good question. That’s a good starting point. My official name is Elizabeth Sarah. I am named after my mother, but I had an aunt whose name was Sarah, and she was known as Sally, so in order to avoid any confusion between me and my mom, who was known as Bettie – now there’s a lot of confusion – I was dubbed Sally. I have spent pretty much the rest of my life trying to escape Sally, for she never sounded very professional to me, but it stuck, and so I think of myself, I guess, as Sally, although when I was in practice, I always used my full name, Elizabeth Sarah, on any legal pleadings, simply because it sounds more lawyer-like.

MS. KAGAN: I have a cousin whose parents named her Merry, and she grew up to be a lawyer and changed her name to Meredith.

MS. GERE: I feel her. I am and have been for many years called Sarah by my three younger sisters, not affectionately, but rather as a way of saying, okay big sister, you think you know it all. We’re going to call you Sarah, like that’s some form of dig.

MS. KAGAN: So would people in a business-type setting call you Elizabeth Sarah?

MS. GERE: No. Usually they just call me Sally. After a while I would forget to answer to Elizabeth, and they'd wonder how many names do you have?

MS. KAGAN: So it would just be in court and on briefs?

MS. GERE: Right.

MS. KAGAN: Where and when were you born?

MS. GERE: I was born on September 14, 1947, in Rochester, New York, and, as just indicated, the eldest child. I have three younger sisters.

MS. KAGAN: Four of you? Four girls all together?

MS. GERE: Four girls, and not for lack of trying on my father's part. But anyway, I have three younger sisters. My dad worked for an insurance agency in Rochester, but his own father passed away, and he had an insurance agency in Syracuse, and when he passed away, my dad was asked to come back and run the insurance agency. So I moved from Rochester to Syracuse when I was probably about two years old.

MS. KAGAN: So you probably don't remember Rochester.

MS. GERE: I don't have much memory at all.

MS. KAGAN: For your folks, was it a happy move?

MS. GERE: That's an interesting question. I think probably for my mom. I don't think my father really looked forward to kind of picking up the family business. I think he was interested in being more independent, but his own mother still was alive, and he came back to run the business so that he would be able to take care of her as well as his own family.

MS. KAGAN: Right. And that's what I was wondering. If he was in the same business, then why not start it out as Gere and Son?

MS. GERE: Right, but I think he wanted to make his own name in his own way in a different place, but that didn't work out, but it seemed to work out just fine.

MS. KAGAN: Did he grow up in Syracuse?

MS. GERE: Yes. He grew up in Syracuse and had sisters and brothers. He had two sisters and a brother. His mom was a homemaker, and his dad ran the insurance agency. And there had been Geres in Syracuse for probably centuries, and there's actually a Gere's Lock that is part of the Erie Canal. So for my dad, obviously, coming back to Syracuse was really coming home.

I went to the same high school that my dad graduated from, and my mom was born in Schenectady, New York. She lost her father at a very young age, and she and her brother and sisters moved to Ithaca, New York.

MS. KAGAN: Why Ithaca?

MS. GERE: My grandmother, her mother, was from that area and she taught school there and raised four children by herself. Anyway, so we're definitely Central New York people.

MS. KAGAN: You have roots there.

MS. GERE: Right.

MS. KAGAN: So you grew up in Syracuse, and is the area where you grew up urban, suburban, somewhere in between?

MS. GERE: At the time I lived there, it probably would be described as urban. My grade school, middle school, was a few blocks walking distance, and then my high school was right truly downtown and drew from most of the city.

MS. KAGAN: I neglected to ask your parent's names.

MS. GERE: My dad's name was David, and my mother's name was Elizabeth Sarah.

MS. KAGAN: And your sisters?

MS. GERE: My sister who is next closest to me in age is named Laura Ruth. My two youngest sisters are identical twins, Margaret Prescott and Marsha Dodge Gere. Very close. My mom had four of us pretty much all the same time, we were growing up together.

MS. KAGAN: So would you describe your family as sort of middle class, upper-middle class?

MS. GERE: I would say aspiring to be middle class would be the best way.

MS. KAGAN: But you didn't want for necessities?

MS. GERE: No, but it wasn't much beyond that.

MS. KAGAN: You say your sisters are all close in age, like a year apart?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: Wow. So not much of a break. Do you think they were hoping for a boy?

MS. GERE: Yes. My mom, actually. It's probably too much information, but my mother had other births that were not successful.

MS. KAGAN: Well she had a great spate of luck then.

MS. GERE: Yes. She did.

MS. KAGAN: You had extended family in Syracuse on your father's side, and any on your mother's side?

MS. GERE: Not in Syracuse, but in Ithaca where my mom's mother was, and then I had an aunt and an uncle who lived there and another aunt who lived there for a while. And lots of cousins. So that's really where her side of the family was.

MS. KAGAN: Right, and that's just down, what is it, I-81?

MS. GERE: Yes. I lived there before there was an I-81. It's like an hour and a half between Syracuse and Ithaca.

MS. KAGAN: Yes. I've spent a lot of time up there. So would you say that your family was close-knit?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: Cousins that you hung around with?

MS. GERE: Yes. On both sides of the family, and usually that would mean spending a fair amount of each summer with cousins, whether my on my dad's side or on my mother's side.

MS. KAGAN: Would you just go to their homes?

MS. GERE: One of my grandmothers, my dad's mother, had, there was a family, it was called a farm, although it was not a working farm that they worked at the time, but that my grandmother would live there during the summer, and one of my aunts and her children would spend the summer there. They were from Long Island. So we would go, you know, basically every weekend and do that during the summer, and in between my dad's working. And then most of all, I just remember a lot of Christmas holidays, Thanksgiving

holidays, with my mom's family in Ithaca, and either we would go there, or they would come to Syracuse.

I have three cousins that were close in age, and we are all very close. It was a very nice way to grow up, and I probably benefited from having cousins who were boys. I didn't have any brothers of my own.

MS. KAGAN: I imagine you learned a couple things from them.

MS. GERE: I learned about train sets. I learned about a lot of things I've forgotten I'm sure about sports and the things that little boys cared about.

MS. KAGAN: And being tough a little bit?

MS. GERE: I don't know. We girls were pretty tough.

MS. KAGAN: You didn't need any boy to teach you that.

MS. GERE: No.

MS. KAGAN: Were you particularly religious?

MS. GERE: My mother was very interested in being sure that we had a religious education, enough to allow us as adults to make choices about our religion. My dad had made his choice about religion, and it did not include going to church. So my mother would take us to Sunday School, and did that for years, to church and Sunday School.

MS. KAGAN: And probably instilled some values?

MS. GERE: Yes. I mean, in addition to understanding more about not only the religion that I was practicing, but about other faiths as well.

MS. KAGAN: Were your sisters your primary playmates?

MS. GERE: Absolutely.

MS. KAGAN: Not that many kids from your elementary school?

MS. GERE: Interesting. We lived in a neighborhood that was one block from the local Catholic Church, and so almost all of the families in the neighborhood were Catholic, and I had three sisters, so there were four kids, but most everybody else had five, six, seven, eight children, and so we had lots and lots of kids down the street, across the street, behind the house.

MS. KAGAN: Was it the kind of thing where you'd come home, change clothes, go out, and come home when your mother yelled for you?

MS. GERE: Yes. We had, at the time I was growing up, a yard, or the plot next to our house was empty, and so it was a good place for kids to congregate, play games and hopscotch or whatever.

MS. KAGAN: So you played hopscotch. Other games as well?

MS. GERE: A lot of roller skating. Just whatever kids do.

MS. KAGAN: Did you dress up, play dolls?

MS. GERE: Yes. I can remember my sister Laura, who's next youngest to me, and I used to have contests. We would each get one of our younger sisters to dress up, and of course since they were identical twins, it all mattered what the outfit was that we had selected. And so of course we would each dress up one of our sisters and then force our mother to try and say who had the best-dressed twin. My mother was far too adept at that. I don't think I recall her ever making a choice.

MS. KAGAN: Were you and Laura closer than either of you were to the twins, given twins' special relationship?

MS. GERE: Yes, probably, and certainly that has existed to today, although I would say all four of us are quite close. But identical twins have a very special bond and a code that the rest of us can't quite crack.

MS. KAGAN: Even a whole language.

MS. GERE: Yes. My two younger sisters developed their own language. My mom also was an identical twin.

MS. KAGAN: I've heard, but I don't know, that typically it skips a generation.

MS. GERE: Usually. I guess that's what has happened, but it didn't in her generation.

MS. KAGAN: Do the twins live near each other now?

MS. GERE: They do. They live about a mile apart, and they are getting close to 70 years old and have never lived more than a mile apart from each other, despite raising families, going to college, coming home, working.

MS. KAGAN: Did they go to college together?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: So they didn't have a revolt against the twinness.

MS. GERE: Oh they had a revolt, and after a while they really rejected the 'I'm not wearing the same outfit as my sister,' but they're just extremely close.

MS. KAGAN: So would you say that you liked doing the girly stuff versus being a tomboy?

MS. GERE: If girly stuff includes reading and studying and loving school, that's what I was. I was not at all athletic, and when I was growing up, girls weren't encouraged to be athletic.

MS. KAGAN: And that's why they were called tomboys if they played with the boys.

MS. GERE: Right. My sisters were more athletic than I was, or am.

MS. KAGAN: Would you say you were you an outgoing child?

MS. GERE: I wasn't shy, but I wasn't outgoing. I was comfortable with who I was. I was not an extrovert or an introvert.

MS. KAGAN: You said you loved school, and I take it you did really well in school.

MS. GERE: I did well in school.

MS. KAGAN: Was the goal to do well in school? Was it that kind of achievement, something you were striving for?

MS. GERE: Yes, and both of my parents were voracious readers, and so that was just what I observed and what I enjoyed and a consequence of reading and studying and thinking about things led to doing well in school.

MS. KAGAN: So the school was a neighborhood school?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: How would you describe its composition?

MS. GERE: It was very much the intimate neighborhood, so a lot of the kids in the neighborhood went to the local Catholic school, but a number of them still went to our grade school, and it was, I would say, a socioeconomic mix of people given where the school drew from.

MS. KAGAN: Was it racially mixed?

MS. GERE: Not so much my grade school, and it went to 8th grade. My high school, definitely was. In my middle school, I would say that there were a lot of first-generation children, but they were primarily Italian, Irish, and some Eastern European.

MS. KAGAN: So a lot of immigrant communities.

MS. GERE: Yes. I mean the families that had come to Syracuse to try and make a life.

MS. KAGAN: Back in the 1950s and early 1960s, times were very different, and there was oftentimes a stigma associated with being in a lower socioeconomic class or someone that was new to the country. Did you get that sense of people being seen that way?

MS. GERE: Yes. Definitely.

MS. KAGAN: In school, did kids mostly play with those like them?

MS. GERE: You know, that's an interesting question because I don't recall that. I don't know whether we were, for the most part very young and kind of growing up together and more accepting of each other. There were, I'm sure there were cliques of kids, but at least at that point in my life in that school, that was not my overwhelming sense.

MS. KAGAN: Were you identified in elementary school as oh she's one of the smart kids? There was a coterie of smart kids?

MS. GERE: Yes. It was usually said in a pejorative or mocking way, and particularly to be a girl and be smart was not how you wanted to be viewed.

MS. KAGAN: Did you have some comrades in that precarious situation?

MS. GERE: I don't really remember any, sad to say.

MS. KAGAN: Lonely at the top.

MS. GERE: I definitely wasn't at the top, but I think the other kids who were focused on doing well in class were probably boys whose families had told them that this was why they had come to the United States, and this was important for them to do well.

MS. KAGAN: That's interesting. Did any of them come from monolingual, non-English-speaking families?

MS. GERE: I assume that they did, but the only thing I recall at this point in my life is, you know, some kids that had more accented speech.

MS. KAGAN: So your school reflected the neighborhood that you lived in pretty much. Did you have any notion of what you wanted to be when you grew up while you were in elementary school?

MS. GERE: While I was in elementary school, probably not. I probably thought, if I thought about it at all, that I would be a teacher, simply because girls were either teachers or they were nurses. I knew at a quite early age I was not cut out to be a nurse. The sight of blood was not going to be part of my chosen profession.

MS. KAGAN: Were there any teachers that you had that you would say had a particular influence on you?

MS. GERE: Certainly by the time I got to high school.

MS. KAGAN: But not in elementary?

MS. GERE: Not in elementary school. I just remember having really dedicated, conscientious teachers who tried very hard to teach the kids what they needed to know. I can think of one that I do not recall fondly, but the rest of them.

MS. KAGAN: Were a happy blend.

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: Do you have any family members who you considered a mentor in some way as having a significant influence on you?

MS. GERE: Well, I knew enough I think at an early stage to recognize that both my grandmothers had graduated from college and that that was quite unusual, and that my one grandmother, my mother's mother, basically raised four children on her own. She was a teacher. My grandmother – and my dad's father died when I was quite young, before I even had any memory of him – and she was a very strong person, so I had two grandmothers that were educated and able to be very capable of taking care of themselves and their families.

MS. KAGAN: Did your mom use her education in any professional way?

MS. GERE: Well my mom did not finish college.

MS. KAGAN: Right. This was your father's mother.

MS. GERE: My father's mother did not work outside the home, although she was very smart. I don't know what more to say about that.

MS. KAGAN: Why did your mother not finish college?

MS. GERE: Because of the Depression. My widowed grandmother was able, pretty astonishingly, to put her son, who was the eldest, through Cornell University. She put her next daughter through Cornell as well, and then came the two twins, and there wasn't enough money left. Both my mom and her twin, my aunt, had gotten maybe two years of college and then dropped out.

MS. KAGAN: Not a lot of financial aid back then.

MS. GERE: My mom went on to become a dental hygienist, and her sister raised her children. My mom was a dental hygienist before she got married and had us children. My aunt married sooner than my mom and had her life devoted to

raising her children. After her children grew up, my aunt worked, but not until then.

MS. KAGAN: So were your mom and her twin very close?

MS. GERE: Very.

MS. KAGAN: Are they still?

MS. GERE: They both passed away, but they were, just as my two younger sisters are, inseparable. Growing up as a little kid, when I would look up, I would not be able to distinguish between my mom and my aunt, and to this day, if I call one of my younger sisters on the phone, I really have to listen carefully to figure out which one I'm speaking with. With cell phones it is easier, but I used to call one sister's house and the other sister would be visiting. I'd be thinking I was talking to one sister, and it would be the other. Anyway, they sound very much alike as well as looking alike.

MS. KAGAN: And so did your mom and her twin live near each other?

MS. GERE: My aunt lived in Ithaca and my mom lived in Syracuse.

MS. KAGAN: How recently did your mom pass away?

MS. GERE: She passed away in 1992.

MS. KAGAN: So you were on your own then?

MS. GERE: Yes. I was extremely close to my mom. I don't know if you've ever read the book that Deborah Tannen, who is a linguistics professor at Georgetown, wrote about sisters. It's called *You Were Always Mom's Favorite!: Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives*. Ms. Tannen interviewed my sisters and me, and we ended up in the book. One of the things that she asked us

was who was mom's favorite. We all confided in her that we were mom's favorite. I thought that was just a terrific testament to my mom, that we all thought that we were her favorite.

MS. KAGAN: But now in hindsight were you really her favorite?

MS. GERE: Well it depends on who you ask. If you asked me, I would say of course, but I think my sisters would have the same of course that they were her favorite.

MS. KAGAN: Was her death unexpected?

MS. GERE: No. She had had breast cancer, and it recurred. She had a number of years in between and then it metastasized and came back, and she passed away rather quickly.

MS. KAGAN: How old was she?

MS. GERE: She was 76, so pretty young. And she had been in terrific health and was hard to keep up with.

MS. KAGAN: Back in that day, though, even having a few years was really amazing. So your dad carried on?

MS. GERE: No. My dad actually died twelve years before my mom, in 1980. He had just retired, so was 65, and was out jogging on the beach down in Florida and had a massive heart attack and died. Which I'm sure if anybody had ever said, Dad, how would you like to go, he would say I'd like to be on the beach jogging. So in some ways I very much regret the loss of my parents at what I view as a young age for myself and for them. I think each of them would not have been good old people. I think things happen for a reason and that those two deaths at those times are probably part of it.

MS. KAGAN: Were the twins still at home when your dad died?

MS. GERE: No. We had all grown up by then.

MS. KAGAN: That helps.

MS. GERE: Yes. My dad was very much of the era that women should be married and have children, and that included his own wife, and so my mom had no financial input, made no decisions. Everything was decided by my dad.

MS. KAGAN: Was that evident to you when you were small?

MS. GERE: Very evident to me.

MS. KAGAN: Was it a source of tension between them?

MS. GERE: Between them? I think my mom tried to play that down just to avoid the tension. It was definitely a source of tension between me and my dad.

MS. KAGAN: Was that from a young age?

MS. GERE: Yes, and being the eldest, I kind of assumed the role of being the spokesperson for my sisters as well as for myself. I think that's one of the reasons that I decided I should become a lawyer. I had spent a lot of years arguing with my father and presenting a case for one of my sisters, whether it was to go away to college or do something. It kind of fell to me to make the case.

MS. KAGAN: And so you were playing that role from as far back as you can remember?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: Would he actively talk to you about his vision of what you should grow up to be?

MS. GERE: Yes. For example, in high school I was told that if I wanted to go to college, I would first have to take typing and shorthand so that I would be able to take care of myself in case I didn't find a husband when I went to college.

MS. KAGAN: How'd that sit with you?

MS. GERE: Not well. Not well. But I did learn, sort of, to type, and I definitely learned shorthand.

MS. KAGAN: Really?

MS. GERE: Under protest.

MS. KAGAN: Well it's a good skill once you're in college.

MS. GERE: Yes. It was good for taking notes. The typing, I never did quite master, so I always looked for boys to date who could type. I figured if it worked for boys, it could work for me too.

MS. KAGAN: Did you feel your dad was sort of demeaning when you were growing up?

MS. GERE: I think he had definite expectations for what we could and should do as girls.

MS. KAGAN: Which was?

MS. GERE: Get married and have a family.

MS. KAGAN: Did that create tension between you and your dad?

MS. GERE: Yes, but that probably is just, again, further training for marshalling facts and evidence and making a case in front of a judge that you knew was not disposed to see things your way.

MS. KAGAN: So what was your plan?

MS. GERE: Well, I got myself away from home to college. My sisters behind me also went away from home to college.

MS. KAGAN: You went away to college?

MS. GERE: I went away to college. That, I think, was probably the big success, in terms of victories. I think the other thing is, as I say, the training of how to identify a position for someone who needed a spokesperson and then to marshal facts and present your case. Sometimes it was beating your head against the wall, but occasionally there would be a ray of sunshine.

MS. KAGAN: So other than the big college move, what were some of the battles that you had with your father over what girls can do and can't do?

MS. GERE: Well, I kind of went along and did, for example, in high school what I wanted to do even if it wasn't something that a girl usually did. It wasn't that he said oh you shouldn't do that or that's not a good idea. It was more I kind of had to figure it out on my own, which isn't necessarily a bad thing either. I was an exchange student when I was a junior in high school. In retrospect looking back on it, I can't remember arguing with my father about it. I look back and wonder how he allowed me to do that, but that was really a real chance for me to step out of my family at a young age and travel abroad, which I'd never done, speak a language I didn't know.

MS. KAGAN: Reading your bio, I was really struck that you were an exchange student at a relatively young age, especially back then. Now there's study abroad all the time and gap year travel, so that was unusual. Was that a program that was run through your school?

MS. GERE: Yes. It was the American Field Service. Our high school historically had a family that hosted a student to come for the year to the United States and

that, as I recall, was one of the prerequisites for our school being able to nominate somebody to go on this program. Because we had hosted someone, I was able to go. Not my family personally hosted, but the school had hosted someone. It was a wonderful experience, but it made me grow up.

MS. KAGAN: Was it hard? Were you frightened?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: But you wanted to do it nonetheless.

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: And you don't recall what your father had to say about it?

MS. GERE: No, other than good luck.

MS. KAGAN: Was your father proud of your academic achievement even though he thought it would be for naught?

MS. GERE: Yes. I'm sure he was, but I never got the sense that he was proud of it as anything other than a means to the end of getting married and having children.

MS. KAGAN: It must have been tough to be selected to go abroad and study.

MS. GERE: It was. As I recall, it was quite competitive, and it did mean being away from your family. I was so fortunate to live with a wonderful family, the Peyrauds, in the South of France that made wine. That was what the family business was, growing grapes and making wine. To this day, their wine is among the best in the world. The winery is called Domaine A. Tempier and is located in Bandol France.

MS. KAGAN: And so were you drinking wine with dinner regularly?

MS. GERE: Yes. I had a younger French sister, Veronique. They would water the wine down for the children, but everybody drank wine for lunch and for dinner. I had never tasted wine in my life, or a lot of the foods that they served either, but it was an adventure.

MS. KAGAN: What did you have to do to get selected?

MS. GERE: I don't even remember. I'm sure I had to be interviewed by somebody.

MS. KAGAN: And advocate on your behalf?

MS. GERE: Yes. I'm sure. To say why I thought I should be the person selected and what I would contribute to the program and whether I had the language skill or the ability to learn the language and whether I would fall apart being away from home for whatever it was, several months' time.

MS. KAGAN: So had you had French training before?

MS. GERE: I had French in high school. I'd had a couple of years by the time I went, so it was very rudimentary. But the way they also operated the program is that they had a ship that transported all of the students going on this program to wherever they were going. They were going all across the world, but they congregated people in New York, and we got on a big ship, and then we sailed initially to Europe.

MS. KAGAN: And you got off there?

MS. GERE: And I got off there, and other people got off and went to different places, but it took, my recollection is, we were on this ship for at least a week.

MS. KAGAN: Was it fun?

MS. GERE: It was fun, but we had classes all day long, so it was immersive for me, immersive French. Others, you know, had other kinds of classes that they studied.

MS. KAGAN: So when you got to France, you got off the boat, and did you know what to do?

MS. GERE: They had someone meet us. We spent a day or two in Paris, and then they transported us, and you know, this is funny. I can't remember. I probably took a train. The little town where I stayed is called Bandol, and it's partway between Marseille and Toulon, on the French Riviera, so I don't have a lot of recollection about precisely how I got to the house, but I did.

MS. KAGAN: Were there other students going to France?

MS. GERE: Yes, but none in the immediate area where I was.

MS. KAGAN: Was it small, sort of like a village?

MS. GERE: Yes, but the home was very much almost like its own village because there was a mother, Lulu, and father, Lucien, and many kids (Francois, Jean-Pierre, Marion, Fleurine, Colette, Laurence and Veronique), some of whom worked in the family business. There were people who came in, merchants to buy wine, people to taste wine. It was a very active place, and the parents of the family with whom I lived, were extremely active in the community, in the Rotary Club, and all that sort of thing. So it was really I joined a family that had a lot of deep roots in the area.

MS. KAGAN: Are you still in contact with them?

MS. GERE: I have not been in contact with them for some time. I did go back and visit them many years after I had left, and my French mother was adamant that I speak to her only in French, even though she spoke English. I hadn't spoken French in a long time. But that was just the way she was when I lived with them because, in her view, she was asking someone to come and live with her family as a way of not only broadening her children's education, but mine to learn a new language, to learn a different culture, to see my own country through different eyes. She is a remarkable woman, who now is over 100 years old.

MS. KAGAN: Did any of the children speak English?

MS. GERE: One, and she went to England for the summer to improve her English, so she was not there.

MS. KAGAN: Did the kids want you to teach them some English?

MS. GERE: Oh, I think we figured out ways to communicate, kind of both ways. And they had listened to American music, so they knew some English.

MS. KAGAN: Culturally, they were more familiar.

MS. GERE: Right.

MS. KAGAN: Where did you go to school while you were there?

MS. GERE: No. I did not go to school. I went for the summer.

MS. KAGAN: Oh, just for the summer.

MS. GERE: Yes, for the summer semester or whatever you call that.

MS. KAGAN: So it was about three months?

MS. GERE: Yes., three or four months.

MS. KAGAN: How was your French when you were there?

MS. GERE: It was good, but when I returned and applied for college and was admitted, I took a placement test and got some number of extra credits in French because I was proficient enough.

MS. KAGAN: So we should go back perhaps to middle school, and high school to talk some more about that experience. Were you involved in a lot of activities?

MS. GERE: In high school, well, in grade school, I did once run for Student Council President in like 6th grade, and I did not win. So very disappointing. In any event, that's about the one thing that I can recall from grade school.

Moving on to high school, yes, I was active in a lot of things. Probably the one that is the most, I think that had the most effect on me, was being the editor in chief of the yearbook, which meant overseeing a staff and figuring out how the book was going to be put together, how it was going to be printed, and who the vendors were. Obviously, we had a teacher who was the advisor, and the teacher who was the advisor was our English teacher, Mrs. Muriel Ketchum, and she was fabulous. She was just wonderful. She was such an inspiration to so many of us that I really was pleased to be selected so that I could get to work with her.

MS. KAGAN: Was she a mentor of sorts?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: In ways of life beyond just working on the yearbook?

MS. GERE: Yes. How to lead a group, the importance of being organized, the importance of doing things on time, the importance of keeping your word.

All the basic things that one needs to be a successful adult and to assume a leadership role. But she also drilled the English language and its proper use into all of us, for which I am forever grateful.

MS. KAGAN: Grammar, punctuation.

MS. GERE: How to deconstruct a sentence.

MS. KAGAN: So I take it you were a high achiever academically as well in high school?

MS. GERE: I did well in my French classes, in Latin. The bane of my existence, however, was math. Math was not something that I excelled at. It was something that I struggled with.

MS. KAGAN: Were you always bad at math or is it the phenomenon that so many females face that once they got into high school, they thought they couldn't do math.

MS. GERE: I think it was that, just really I never felt comfortable with it, and certainly it was not something that at home I saw my mother doing or my father or learning any real application. I just didn't find it as fun as reading a good book.

MS. KAGAN: In high school, there tend to be cliques, in-crowds, out-crowds, various other crowds. I imagine you would have to balance that in constructing the yearbook.

MS. GERE: Yes. And my high school was very diverse. It was located in the inner-city, right downtown. It was built in 1900 and now is on the National Register of Historic Places but no longer is a school. When I attended, there were kids who were wealthy. There were kids who were poor. There were kids who were black. There were kids who were white. There were the first-

generation kids that I'd gone to middle school with and others with long Syracuse histories. It was a very large school.

MS. KAGAN: How many students were there?

MS. GERE: Gosh, I can't even remember. Probably, I would be totally guessing, I don't know whether we got to a thousand. I think it would kind of depend on how you counted because there was an academic part of the school, and there was a vocational part. It was all sort of under the same roof, but it was a big extended facility.

MS. KAGAN: What was the name of the school?

MS. GERE: It was called Syracuse Central Technical High School.

MS. KAGAN: Were kids programmed to go in one of the two tracks?

MS. GERE: No. It was not as we think of today's magnet schools. It wasn't as though you applied or demonstrated some particular proficiency or interest. It was, as I recall, strictly by interest. You could be in the academic portion, or, as my younger sister Laura chose, she went to the vocational school because she knew from the same young age that I knew I did not want to be a nurse, that was what she wanted to be. So she chose to go to the vocational part of the high school. When she graduated from high school, she was an LPN, and so then when she went to college, she got her RN. There were programs for auto mechanics, for carpentry, for engineering, for chemical engineering in the vocational school. And then the academic part of the high school was just like regular high school.

MS. KAGAN: That's interesting because it's thought of as a vocational program, but yet it wasn't just for kids that didn't have what it took to go to college. There were courses such as pre-engineering in high school that help prepare students for college.

MS. GERE: Yes. As I recall, there were no girls in any of the engineering programs, but all the boys who had the best math grades, that's where they gravitated.

MS. KAGAN: There were, I imagine, certain core curriculum courses that were imposed, and so, for example, everybody had to take some English, some history, things like that. Were the two parts of the school integrated for such courses?

MS. GERE: As I recall, yes. I think my sister Laura probably had some of the same teachers I did on the academic side. Boy, you're asking a lot of questions that I have to think back to [laughter].

MS. KAGAN: It's interesting, though, when you think about it. Were the kids that went into the auto mechanic and those kinds of fields steered toward that?

MS. GERE: I don't think they were steered to it so much as well that's what either somebody in their family had done, or they'd seen somebody who did that, and they didn't have any interest in going to college.

MS. KAGAN: Was it a socioeconomic question among some?

MS. GERE: It probably was. I suspect so.

MS. KAGAN: So what year was it that you started high school?

MS. GERE: I started at Syracuse Central Tech in 1963, and I graduated in 1965. I was there for three years.

MS. GERE: Did you graduate early?

MS. GERE: No.

MS. KAGAN: Oh, was it 10, 11, 12?

MS. GERE: Yes. It was 10, 11, 12. No, that can't be right. It must have been 9, 10, 11, 12. Yes, because our grade school went to 8th grade, so I must have started in 1962. That makes more sense, 1962 to 1965.

MS. KAGAN: Did you have a group of friends?

MS. GERE: Oddly, the high school had sororities and fraternities then. Don't ask me why in high school you had such things, but back in the day, that's what they did, and so I was in one of the sororities. I also had friends, girlfriends, who were not in the sorority. I don't recall them being members. I had a couple of girlfriends I guess that I was sort of close with, but mostly not. I was much closer with the people who worked on the yearbook or in the Honor Society or were in the French Club or who wanted to be exchange students. I did not view my social existence solely through the lens of this sorority.

MS. KAGAN: Was it difficult to get accepted into the sorority?

MS. GERE: I don't even remember. Probably, which, had I thought about it or known, would have made me uncomfortable.

MS. KAGAN: So, did you consider yourself, looking back, as a competitive kid?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: Where do you think that comes from?

MS. GERE: My father. I guess internally wanting to prove that I could be a successful person separate and apart from being a married mother.

MS. KAGAN: Right, so in some respects, were you trying to show that you were as good as any boy?

MS. GERE: Yes. So probably. I was just going to say probably that, that I was trying to be the son that he didn't have, intellectually, even if not physically, which, of course, is a terrible presumption because that assumes that a boy would have been smarter or more academically gifted.

MS. KAGAN: Or at least had expectations in that area of him. Was it something that was spoken about, that your parents or your father wanted to have a boy?

MS. GERE: Yes. That was pretty clear.

MS. KAGAN: For your mother and your father?

MS. GERE: Yes. I think my dad was always, I think there was a tinge of disappointment. I think it would have been somewhat ameliorated if it had been 20 or 30 years later when girls were encouraged to be athletically competitive. That just wasn't the era, so there was not that outlet for sharing.

MS. KAGAN: Right. He couldn't come watch a game on Friday night kind of thing.

MS. GERE: Right or have the vocabulary to sit and watch football because my dad loved it – it's hard to live in Syracuse and not pay attention to the Syracuse football team, or at least back then it certainly was – but none of us had had the vocabulary. My dad was an excellent golfer but we never golfed.

MS. KAGAN: He didn't introduce you to golfing?

MS. GERE: Very briefly. It was too expensive.

MS. KAGAN: Did your dad go to Syracuse?

MS. GERE: Yes. He did.

MS. KAGAN: And his dad?

MS. GERE: And his dad went to Syracuse, and his mother went to Syracuse.

MS. KAGAN: So definitely a family loyalty there.

MS. GERE: Right.

MS. KAGAN: Did the youngest two girls, the twins, sort of feel like they were the big disappointment? Not only were they not a boy, they were two not boys.

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: Were there comments made?

MS. GERE: Yes. Unfortunately, by the time it got down to them, I think there was a feeling of disappointment.

MS. KAGAN: Was it the kind of thing that was brought up when they might misbehave?

MS. GERE: No. Oh my goodness, none of us misbehaved. My father was a very strict disciplinarian. We did not misbehave. If we did, it only happened once.

MS. KAGAN: And so you were lashing out, I don't know if that's the right word, but asserting yourself came through, not staying out beyond curfew or things like that, but came through your academic ability and your ability to challenge him orally.

MS. GERE: Right, and to excel at whatever I took up that was not athletics or mathematics, either one of those.

MS. KAGAN: Did your father end up having any boy grandchildren?

MS. GERE: No. None of them had been born by then. I'm trying to think. I might have spoken too quickly. My sister Laura had a daughter and her first son before my father died. Zac was just a little baby so was never really part of my

father's life because by then my sister and her family were living in Kentucky.

MS. KAGAN: Was it a big disappointment to your mom not to have a boy?

MS. GERE: No, because she loved us girls.

MS. KAGAN: Whoever showed up.

MS. GERE: Yes, whoever showed up and was in good health.

MS. KAGAN: So, when you went to high school, that was before the days where political activism was infused in high schools and things like that, so was it what you would picture as a 1950s kind of atmosphere?

MS. GERE: Yes. Very much so. Very much so. My dad was sort of, but not very, involved in local politics. I remember somebody trying to get him to run for some office. My parents were very engaged citizens, always voted, always studied who was running for office, and I think instilled in us the importance of being good citizens and being informed voters from a very young age. But in terms of being active politically, I don't think so. My high school days were just on the cusp of world events exposing all of us to a lot.

MS. KAGAN: Did you go to dances?

MS. GERE: Yes. I went to dances when I was invited. I had met through church a boy who became my boyfriend in high school. He went to a different high school. He went to the high school where the much upper-middle class, upper-class kids in Syracuse went to school.

MS. KAGAN: So he didn't live in your area?

MS. GERE: Not in my neighborhood area, but I would see him at church, and we dated. He was, still is, a wonderful person, who went on, ironically, to Cornell of all places, and so I would spend some more time in Ithaca after he went there. He and I are the same age. I did go back for some college parties a couple of different times to Cornell. So that too was kind of another eye opener for me was to go to his high school dances and to meet his friends. To see their lives and what they could afford and what was going to be expected of them was far, far different from my high school friends.

MS. KAGAN: Do you know whether the girls were treated differently than the girls in your high school?

MS. GERE: I don't, although again sort of ironically, I ended up in college living with a girl who had gone to high school with him. She was brilliant. She still is.

MS. KAGAN: When you were in high school, did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up?

MS. GERE: No. Again, I knew that my assignment was to go to college and find a husband and get married and have children.

MS. KAGAN: So that did stick with you?

MS. GERE: Oh yes. Absolutely.

MS. KAGAN: Was it a concern that you wouldn't find a husband?

MS. GERE: There definitely was a concern, and I didn't find someone until just before I graduated from college. He was not somebody that my father approved of.

MS. KAGAN: Oh? Were they kind of pushing you to get a boyfriend?

MS. GERE: My father assumed that if I went to this college, which was Denison University, most people there would be well-to-do. He didn't care which one, just get married to him. I certainly dated in college, but the person that I ended up deciding to marry just before I graduated was probably one of two people that was at the college on scholarship, so it didn't exactly turn out the way my father had planned.

MS. KAGAN: What happened to the high school boyfriend who went to Cornell.

MS. GERE: We both decided that, he was studying to be an architect, and that was a five-year course. We both decided that after our first year of college, we really needed to date other people and see what the world was like. It was a good decision for us, and to this day, I stay in touch with him.

MS. KAGAN: It sounds like there wasn't any heartbreak associated with it.

MS. GERE: Not on my side. I don't think on his. I think we both eventually came to the same conclusion.

MS. KAGAN: How did you decide where you wanted to go to college?

MS. GERE: The summer that I was an exchange student, my parents knew that my sisters were going to be disappointed to not be doing something exciting themselves. My parents rented a cottage up on the Saint Lawrence Seaway for the summer so that my sisters would have something exciting and different to do. As a result of living in this cottage for the summer, it happened to be next door to the cottage of the man who was president of Denison University. My father obviously listened to him all summer long, and when I came home from France, my father said, you can either go to

Syracuse University and live at home, or you can go to this place called Denison University in Granville, Ohio, and no, we don't have money for you to go and look at it. Take your choice.

MS. KAGAN: Was the French trip between your junior and senior years?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: So you came back, and it was time to think about college. Had you been thinking about college?

MS. GERE: I had, and I had decided at some point that I wanted to go to what was then called the Seven Sisters schools, Vassar or Smith or whatever, and so I had taken Latin because at the time, to be admitted, one had to have had three years of Latin, so I dutifully took Latin, for which I'm also eternally grateful that I did. But my father was, I don't know, the other schools must have cost too much or maybe my grades weren't right. I don't know, but by the time it came down to it, it pretty much was, and I think I also thought about Duke, and I don't know why. I'd never been there, didn't know anybody who was there.

MS. KAGAN: Did you apply to all three?

MS. GERE: No. I recall that I applied to Denison. I don't know whether I applied to Duke or not, and I don't think I applied to any of the Seven Sister schools.

MS. KAGAN: Did you apply to Syracuse?

MS. GERE: I did, as I recall, but I was accepted at Denison, and I was thrilled to be going there.

MS. KAGAN: But you knew almost nothing about it.

MS. GERE: Nothing about it.

MS. KAGAN: But you knew it wasn't in Syracuse.

MS. GERE: It wasn't in Syracuse. My father was not going to be close by, and the brochures looked very nice.

MS. KAGAN: And there were boys there.

MS. GERE: There were boys there, somebody that I might find to get married to, and they had plenty of classes in French, and so seemed like an okay place to me.

MS. KAGAN: Did you resent your father for kind of pushing you towards that?

MS. GERE: I probably did a bit at the time. But honestly, reading about Denison and thinking I was so grateful to even be given that opportunity to go to college, even if I had been somehow resentful at the beginning, I certainly wasn't after I got there or when I graduated.

MS. KAGAN: Was it a given that you would go to college?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: And what about your sisters?

MS. GERE: Yes, which I guess is, thinking back on it, I suppose that was fairly open-minded about my father that he thought that we all at least should get a college education, but it was not necessarily for the right reason.

MS. KAGAN: So when you went away to college, did you feel like you got a separation from your father?

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: And did you feel like there was less that you had to prove?

MS. GERE: Oh no. No. Because I still had to figure out how to get good grades and, you know, be in the right activities and find somebody to go out with, all that sort of thing. I had to be a successful college student.

MS. KAGAN: What year did you enter?

MS. GERE: I started in 1965 and then graduated in 1969.

MS. KAGAN: So life was getting political then?

MS. GERE: It was, but not so much at Denison. It was still a very, I mean it's a small school in pretty much rural Ohio. It was not anything like, had I gone to Syracuse University, for example, it would have been far different from Denison. So it was the beginnings, and there were some of the students, particularly as I got closer to my senior year and started looking around and thinking about the rest of the world and what I was going to do with my life, realizing that it was not going to be insular as my college experience pretty much had been. When I went to college, before the year I graduated, women lived on one side of the campus, the men lived on the other. There were very strict curfew rules. It was truly a different time.

MS. KAGAN: And things changed pretty rapidly.

MS. GERE: The year after I left, it changed dramatically.

MS. KAGAN: Did you have a general awareness about what was going on?

MS. GERE: Yes. General.

MS. KAGAN: But there really wasn't anybody at Denison that kind of had a torch.

MS. GERE: There were people, I'm sure, but I was focused on getting my grades, and I had a job so I could help pay for my education, and it was pretty much what I focused on.

MS. KAGAN: What kind of job did you have?

MS. GERE: I, for several years, worked in the dining hall. Back then, you used to get a tray, and you'd come through a line, people would serve you your food, and I was one of the people in the hairnets serving the food.

And in my junior year, I was selected to be what we then called a junior advisor. I lived in the freshman dorm. I had a roommate, and the two of us were responsible for one wing, one floor, of the freshman dorm.

MS. KAGAN: Was it like an RA?

MS. GERE: Yes. It was like an RA, and that paid for my room and board, I believe. It was very prestigious to get this position. It was very competitive, in part, I'm sure, because of the financial piece of it. It also was a lot of work.

MS. KAGAN: Was it a tough position?

MS. GERE: It was tough because you saw the struggles of a lot of young women and, fortunately, my time was before drugs, but certainly alcohol, what we now know as depression, people really struggling academically, people who had never been away from home, people whose parents had set expectations that were just totally unrealistic.

MS. KAGAN: But you had the kind of temperament that was well-suited to people coming and opening up to you.

MS. GERE: Yes. I was a listener.

MS. KAGAN: And how did that come about? Do you think you were a born listener?

MS. GERE: A born listener and somebody that having had my younger sisters around and listening to them, I guess it kind of translated to being a listener in college.

MS. KAGAN: And compassionate.

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: It could have had the other effect because of your sisters, that you're used to being the boss and having little sympathy for immature behavior.

MS. GERE: Yes. Sometimes I think they thought I was the bossy big sister, but it was one way for me, I mentioned earlier that I thought about teaching, but helping my younger sisters with their homework made me realize I didn't have the patience to be a good teacher, so I pretty much knew that was not going to be my vocation.

MS. KAGAN: What did you major in?

MS. GERE: I majored in history. At Denison, in order to graduate with honors, you had to do a thesis. I wanted to write my thesis in French in the History Department. The History Department did not have enough professors who were fluent enough in French to read my thesis, so I said fine, I will switch majors, and I will be a French major, and then I will write my thesis in French. So that's what I did.

MS. KAGAN: On a different topic?

MS. GERE: Yes. Totally different. I analyzed a novel, the Charterhouse of Parma by Stendhal, for my thesis.

MS. KAGAN: A French novel?

MS. GERE: Yes. A French novel. We called them Honors projects back then.

MS. KAGAN: So there you were, going through college. You're getting toward the end of it. Had you found a husband?

MS. GERE: No. I had not. Probably at some point, probably in my senior year. Gosh, I'd have to go back and reconstruct, but at some point, as I got closer to graduation, there was someone that I was dating, and he was a very special person, on scholarship. We decided that we should get married. I at that point already had been accepted at Syracuse University Law School on a full scholarship. He had been accepted at GW Law School on a scholarship. We had decided we would get married at the end of our first semester of law school, but then you really can't transfer in the middle of the year, so we both thought well, we'll play out the year and then we'll decide where we're going to finish up. There wasn't much contest. I transferred to George Washington University Law School.

MS. KAGAN: What made you decide you wanted to be a lawyer? When did you really make the decision that's what you wanted to do?

MS. GERE: Obviously, I had to decide, I guess I would have decided in my junior year because I had to take LSATs. By that point, I hadn't found anybody to marry. All of my close college female friends were getting married, with one exception, the woman that I lived with when I was a resident advisor. She was going to medical school. I knew I would not be going to medical school and looked around and said okay, all the other girls are getting married. What are the guys doing? All the guys I knew well were taking LSATs, so I

thought I'll do that, and that's about the extent of it. I thought I don't know any lawyers though. I've never met a lawyer, but I know how to argue, and I don't have anything else to do, so I might as well go to law school. Maybe there'll be a husband there.

MS. KAGAN: A lawyer by default.

MS. GERE: Yes.

MS. KAGAN: There are a lot of default lawyers around. Going back to your college days, what kinds of activities were you involved in?

MS. GERE: I was in a lot of things. In addition to working, I was on what was called the Judicial Council, for which certain students were designated and basically you would hear things like student infractions, curfew infractions, and it was at the time kind of a peer system for dealing with disciplinary issues,. That probably also helped my interest in being a lawyer. I was in Phi Beta Kappa.

MS. KAGAN: Were there activities associated with that?

MS. GERE: I guess. I think we had dinners, but it was not a big-time commitment. I also was active in a sorority, Kappa Kappa Gamma, until my senior year. I was not comfortable with the rush process and withdrew. But by then, I really had a very, to my mind, interesting circle of friends, most of whom, a lot of whom, men, particularly, were not in fraternities. You know, guys that I worked with in the dining hall that came from a different strata from most of the students at Denison.

MS. KAGAN: Why did you go into a sorority in the first place?

MS. GERE: Because at the time that I started, something like 96% of freshmen were in either sororities or fraternities. You did not live in the house at any point. You always lived in a dorm. So it wasn't quite as confining, I think, as other sororities are. But it was just what you did. And I picked a sorority that one of my mother's sisters had been in and one of my father's sisters had been in it. So it's like okay, it must be meant to be.

MS. KAGAN: Was there a dress code at that point?

MS. GERE: Oh yes. Definitely a dress code for going to classes, and I'll never forget that when my first husband and I finally got married and we moved in together, one of his first questions was, where are all your clothes. I said all those clothes belonged to my roommate who had a lot of clothes, and she was lovely and lent me her clothes. I did not have money to invest in a wardrobe. And then when I got married, I was very, very fortunate to have a mother-in-law who was spectacular and had never had a daughter. She was a fabulous seamstress and made all my clothes, which was very nice.

MS. KAGAN: Did you do other activities, anything like a yearbook-type activity?

MS. GERE: I did not do anything like that. I think mostly being on the Judicial Council, being a student advisor, the sorority, and working in the dining facility and trying to get good grades and work on my Honors project.

MS. KAGAN: That sounds like quite a full plate. Did you go home on vacations or break from school?

MS. GERE: Not frequently because that was pretty far to go.

MS. KAGAN: How far was it?

MS. GERE: It would have been, or was, at least an eight-hour drive, and I didn't have the money to fly, so it would mean I would come home at Christmastime pretty much, and in the summer. I was lucky to have roommates along the way that were more local. The woman, Chris Kreger, that I lived with who went on to medical school was from Cincinnati. That was pretty close, and I did spend some holidays with her family.

MS. KAGAN: That's nice. So anything else about going to Denison? How would you say it changed you?

MS. GERE: It gave me more confidence in myself. It exposed me to, probably ironically, most people go to college and are exposed to people of a different socioeconomic strata, and mine was the upper strata, to which I had not ever been exposed, but it helped me see more of the world or more variations in people. I had a wonderful education. I had terrific professors, people that were really dedicated. I had wonderful friends. It was a very positive experience.

MS. KAGAN: No adjustment problems?

MS. GERE: Oh I missed my sisters and my mother terribly, and that was back in the day when you'd have to get a roll of quarters and go stand in line to get to the one phone booth in the dorm. I wrote a lot of letters. I still have probably some of them somewhere that my mom wrote to me.

MS. KAGAN: Did you communicate with your father often?

MS. GERE: He'd get on the phone occasionally, when I called, but his questions would be how's the weather or how's school.

MS. KAGAN: It sounds like he was sort of a typical 1950s father, not very engaged.

MS. GERE: I would say that.

MS. KAGAN: You knew he loved you, but the relationship didn't really go beyond that.

MS. GERE: Yes. It's not demonstrative in other ways.

MS. KAGAN: And do you feel like he knew you as a person?

MS. GERE: I think so. And I think, truth be told, by the time I graduated from law school and had some of my first cases, I think he was extremely proud of me, and I think he saw in me things that, had he not had to come back and take over his father's business, he might have accomplished.

MS. KAGAN: Just a couple more questions about Denison. What was the composition of the student body like?

MS. GERE: We had some minorities, but not a significant number.

MS. KAGAN: Did the minorities stick together?

MS. GERE: Yes. Unfortunately, which was reinforced by the sororities and fraternities and the geographical isolation of Granville. People did not choose to go to Denison to be exposed to the world. They picked Denison to go and reinforce the world they came from, except for me and my husband-to-be.

MS. KAGAN: Did most of the students come from Ohio or Midwest area?

MS. GERE: Yes. A significant number of kids from Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Chicago area.

MS. KAGAN: I imagine Syracuse wasn't that different from a lot of midwestern cities at that time.

MS. GERE: Probably not. Probably not.

MS. KAGAN: So you felt like you fit in?

MS. GERE: Except that everybody had a lot more money than I did and had had a lot more exposure to the world than I had had.

MS. KAGAN: Was that an issue? Did it create a problem for you with your social life?

MS. GERE: No. I just realized that, as I say, there was a different strata in the world that I hadn't experienced.

MS. KAGAN: You weren't aware of the way rich kids lived?

MS. GERE: No. I was not aware of people taking ski vacations or going to the Caribbean for Spring break or having wardrobes that I didn't have or having gone to a private school or having parents who were lawyers and doctors and such.

MS. KAGAN: Did that trouble you?

MS. GERE: No. I don't think it troubled me. I just knew that I didn't quite fit, or at least I didn't feel like I quite fit.

This is probably a good place to stop.

MS. KAGAN: Okay.