Oral History # 068

An Interview With
Sara Speer Selber

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Interviewer: Lynn Schwartzenburg
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LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: This is Lynn Schwartzenburg interviewing Sara Speer Selber for The oH Project. The interview is taking place August 27, 2019, in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Ms. Selber to document her recollections concerning the response to HIV/AIDS in Houston.

Welcome, and thank you for doing this.

SARA SELBER: Thank you for doing what you-all are doing. Extraordinary.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Tell me, when and where were you born?

SARA SELBER: I was born in 1957 in Houston, Texas, at Texas Children’s Hospital.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Where is your family from?

SARA SELBER: My mother is from a little town in Louisiana called Kaplan, which was founded by her great uncle, Abrom Kaplan; and my daddy is from Beaumont.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: How did they meet?

SARA SELBER: They met when my father was in optometry school and my mother was in boarding school in Nashville, Tennessee, on basically a blind phone date.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: How funny. How did they end up in Houston, then?

SARA SELBER: They got married, and my dad started his optometry practice in Houston, so they both, I think, wanted to move to a bigger city. My dad’s parents had already moved here by then, and there was obviously nothing in Kaplan, Louisiana, but rice, and Daddy was an optometrist, so they came to Houston.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Where did you go to school?

SARA SELBER: Elementary school, I went to Jennie Katharine Kolter. Middle school,
I went to Albert Sidney Johnston, which is now Meyerland something. Then high school, I went to Hockaday in Dallas, which was a girl’s school, because I was very, very athletic and relatively smart, and that was socially not terribly acceptable back in the 1960s and 1970s. My mom had gone to boarding school, and my parents sent me to boarding school.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How did you find that experience?

SELBER: I was tentative until I saw all the athletic facilities and the opportunities. In fact, the first speaker I heard — it was a pretty small school; there were only 300 kids in the high school, girls — was Gloria Steinem, in 1973. We were pretty exposed to people like Gloria Steinem and Art Buchwald and Sissy Farenthold at a very, very young age, and it made quite the impression on me. In the boarding department, it was really an international situation, so I got to experience what today we would think of as the global economy, when I was 16, 17, and 18 years of age.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Was it something that you appreciated at the time, or did in retrospect?

SELBER: I loved it at the time, I did.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Which sports were you involved in?

SELBER: I primarily played tennis. Back then, we played half-court basketball, so I played basketball. I loved volleyball because all of my friends from Mexico played volleyball, but tennis was really the sport that they wanted me to play.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How big of a school was it?

SELBER: The high school was 300 students, 300 girls. It was preschool, all the way up, and because I loved kids and student teaching, I kind of knew almost every kid in
the school through student teaching and just loved it.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How did high school prepare you scholastically for college?

SELBER: Oh, yeah, my preparation for that academic environment was not sufficient. I was always behind. Most of the day students were two, three years ahead of me, and so I was making minimum grades at best and working really hard. The good news was, anywhere we applied for college, we pretty much got accepted, so that was the good news.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What were your interests about college in terms of major and where to go?

SELBER: I wasn’t really academically all that motivated. I loved sports. I loved people. I loved having fun. Tulane always kind of had my interest. My mom had gone to Newcomb. They wanted me to play tennis, so I ended up in New Orleans, which was just perfect for me, perfect. I ended up choosing a major of speech pathology and minored in art history, but for me my real education was the streets of New Orleans. I learned so much about life through the city of New Orleans and was very involved in all kinds of social service projects and tutoring in the Ninth Ward and in the Tremé and got to befriend a lot of the musicians and the artists and restaurateurs, and I really felt like I was really entrenched in the city of New Orleans and her culture.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What did you do after you graduated from Tulane?

SELBER: After I graduated, which I consider a complete miracle because I was, like I said, not all that academically engaged — the city had my heart and soul — I ended up at the University of Houston getting my master’s in communications disorders. Back then, there weren’t a whole lot of choices. I remember telling my
father I wanted to be a physician, a pediatrician, and he was like, “Pediatrician that. You find a husband.”

Then it was like, “Well, okay, I think I want to be a rabbi,” because I had worked at a Jewish summer camp and I loved it. I came home and I went, “That’s it. I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to be a rabbi.”

My father said, “What happened to the pediatrician?” because I think the only thing they could think of more deplorable than me not getting married would be a female coming out of college and then going on to become a rabbi. Our choices were very, very limited back then as women.

SCHWARTZENBURG: He didn’t hear the speech by Steinem, then.

SELBER: Well, we heard it. We all heard it, and we were all very motivated. I think my graduating college class is some of those earliest women that did become doctors and lawyers. The school to this day talks about our class of 1975; that we tended to be that class that broke a whole lot of barriers very quickly.

SCHWARTZENBURG: In terms of what they did with their lives after graduation?

SELBER: In terms of what they did with their lives and their work, and some started companies, and lots of attorneys, lots of high-level educators. After I got my master’s, my husband said, “Marry me and move to Midland, Texas,” and I said, “Okay, prove it’s on a map,” and he did, and that’s where I worked with Kay Bynum, and we started back then what was called the Bynum School. There were three of us: Melanie Johnston, who was another speech pathologist; myself; and Kay. It was a school for profoundly, profoundly developmentally-delayed children. Back then, Laura and George Bush were there, and Secretary of Commerce Donny and Susie Evans. There were lots of these children with
absolutely nowhere to go, so we started the school that to this day is apparently still thriving. We saw our first case of autism. It was fantastic.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How long did you stay in Midland?

SELBER: I think I was in Midland for nine years. Then my husband said we’ve been transferred to Oklahoma City. At that time, I had a consulting firm, Selko and Associates, and so I could still travel and do what I needed to do and always believed that my children needed to understand some independence from a very early age and that Mommy and Daddy aren’t always going to be right there holding your hand to walk you into every situation, which also later in life worked out really well. I was still traveling and consulting, and it was when I was in Oklahoma City that I was doing contract work for Planned Parenthood. This was in the, probably, late 1980s, and we saw the first case of AIDS in Oklahoma. It was just like the movies. I was doing a program and chose infectious disease to be a doc for a day and followed this doctor who was seeing these patients, the only one, probably, in the state. It was exactly like the movies. Everything was in isolation. She was quite brave in hindsight.

SCHWARTZENBURG: The doctor?

SELBER: Very brave woman, yes.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Was she wearing gloves?

SELBER: Oh, completely protected. I mean, gloves, face masks, over-body covering. I couldn’t go in. I could only watch from outside. There was a glass window, that I could see. What I remember is how tactiley engaged she was with the patients and how kind. You could see the terror on his face until she walked in, and his whole body — I mean, that visual will never leave my psyche, and her, and how
she just kept touching him and loving on him, and it was so great because
everybody else was scared to death, including Planned Parenthood. How do we
even begin to talk about prevention education in Oklahoma City?

SCHWARTZENBURG: At that time?

SELBER: At that time.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did you know about how it was transmitted?

SELBER: I think everyone at that point knew that sexual transmission. I’m not sure
needles had come into play, but certainly we were talking about latex and
protective barriers during sexual situations.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Was there only one patient with AIDS?

SELBER: That was the only one I saw. Very soon after that, maybe three months after
that, the oil business, which my husband was in, had just tanked, and so I said
we’ve got to go to Houston, where there’s at least some opportunity for both of
us. We sold the house within like three days of listing it. There was a little ad in
the paper for director of AIDS Foundation Houston. I called my friend Barry
Mandel, and he said, “Don’t even think about it. They’d have numerous directors
in the last eight years. Nobody can help them.”

I said, “Get me the job. I have the passion for it. I don’t know if I can
help, but I have some real passion around this.”

At the same time this was happening, one of our cousins went home with
AIDS to Shreveport to die, and I saw how people were treating his parents and
what was being said, including I wasn’t allowed to go visit with my kids, which
of course I was going to go visit. That was ridiculous. Barry called the AIDS
Foundation, and I sent my résumé.
Mike Mizwa and Patty Armstrong got the résumé, and they looked at it and went, “Ooh, wait a minute.” So Mike called someone on the board and said, “We know you’re about to hire someone. Please interview this person.”

So I got a call when I was in Oklahoma City, and they said, “Can you come and be interviewed?” Two days later, I was in the car, interviewing, and a week later, moved home, moved in, and started work.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Tell me, what was the state of the state, I guess, of the foundation?

SELBER: This was, I think, 1993–1994, as I recall. It was Houston, and the attitude, it was still, primarily in terms of the media, the gay white disease. There was only Ryan White funding. The private sector hadn’t really dove in. The foundations weren’t really involved. I was just another suspect, another person going through the doors of AIDS Foundation. There were bets at the office how long I would last.

The state, the one thing that still comes in my head is my father, who was a physician, saying, “Are you going to eat at the office?” That was like wow, we’ve got a lot of work to do, because obviously we weren’t going to get AIDS from food, and yet my own father was completely unaware of how this virus was transmitted.

When I got there, I was so surprised because it was hemophiliacs and it wasn’t just what the media wanted everyone to believe, which was this disease that came to cure us of gay people. I mean, it couldn’t have been further from the truth. It was scary as hell, but I also walked in to this staff of people who were so unbelievably committed and caring and loving, and other than teasing me and
joking and pranking and giving me a hard time, couldn’t have been more welcoming, so welcoming that the first Sunday, I think, I was there, they took me to La Strada for brunch, which was the last time I went with my staff to La Strada for brunch because I had to get home in a cab, thought I had lost my car the next day when it was time to go to work.

It was a lot of laughter and a lot of tears, a whole lot of tears. I found it was very collegial. All of the AIDS organizations pretty much were very helpful. In particular, I think Katy Caldwell was very welcoming and kind of made it a point to show me the ropes. Sue Cooper, who was at Harris County, worked with me when we almost lost all of our funding. Our director of social services was only serving people with AIDS and not people with HIV, as well, which clearly was against the contract.

SCHWARTZENBURG: So she pointed that out to you?

SELBER: They wrote us a letter saying they were taking all of our funds. Back then, we were about a $1 million budget, of which about $800,000 was from the county, and so Sue gambled on us fixing it all.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How did you fix it?

SELBER: I didn’t. I listened to what the team said needed to happen and just supported whatever they needed. If they were working until 2:00 in the morning, I would be there bringing them food. I mean, my whole attitude about what was happening was, I needed to be the person in the room with the least amount of knowledge at all times, to figure out who had the best knowledge and the best skill sets to bring to the table so that we could get things done quicker, more efficiently, and in a true team spirit.
SCHWARTZENBURG: How big was the staff?

SELBER: I think when I got there, the staff — I was trying to picture the room — it was probably about 30 people. It was very manageable. We were very fortunate. Our landlord, who turns out was an icon in Houston, Paul Wahlberg, had such a soft spot for not only the agency but for someone who became our chief operating officer, Patty Armstrong, that he would always work with us on rent and space. Any project that we were involved in, he would try and help us get funding. He even brokered us into the Shell Houston Open, which talk about breaking a barrier. I think he might have been the one that got Mike Mizwa into the locker room of the Rockets because we knew that these athletes needed prevention education. He became a great partner to us. He’s also the founder of The Chinquapin School. Just this wonderful man that you would never have suspected would have been as helpful and generous as he was. That’s what I found to be the best part of it all, was the people who were the most helpful.

I clearly remember walking into The Junior League of Houston because I’m a member of The Junior League, and I thought, all right, The Junior League started Baylor Teen Clinic. They started Texas Children’s. They’ve always been very progressive in addressing issues. Ann Stern was the president, and she immediately saw me. She’s now CEO [chief executive officer] of the Houston Endowment. I said, “Look, Ann, this is a pandemic. This is really serious stuff, and I don’t care if The Junior League gives us a dollar. I just need you-all to fund it and bless it so that this will be on the radar screen.”

I think she called me back like four days later and said, “Come to my office.” She blew through all processes, which Junior League is very process-
oriented. She said, “Look, here’s a check for $3,000. Use it as you see fit. Consider us a funder, and if there’s ever a project where we can get involved and bring our volunteers, let us know.”

I went, “Tomorrow,” and so they were our first sort of outside-of-the-traditional-environment Stone Soup volunteers, Junior League women. That led to when we were ready to start Camp Hope, and we had a weekend called Camp H.U.G. [Hope, Understanding, and Giving], which was respite care for parents, The Junior League staffed the camp. Least likely, in terms of how we brand and how we think.

That’s what I hope the legacy of so much of AIDS brings to the forefront, especially in light of where we are today, is that we tend to operate in this world of assumptions before ever giving people an opportunity. The more people that we gave opportunities to just by touring and explaining and showing, the more they wanted to help. I never asked anyone for a dime, ever. I never, ever said, “Would you give me $50,000?” I never.

They were like, “How do we help?” “What do you need from us?” “How do we groom our next generation?”

I mean, that was sort of the case with the Fondren Foundation. Big David Underwood toured, and he was so impacted. He said, “Look, we definitely want
to fund you. We want to get involved, but I’d really like for you to have my son, David Underwood, Jr., tour and get involved. If there’s a fit for him somewhere in the organization, please — I love how you-all are operating; I think this is how the next generation needs to be operating — can you find a place for him?” Turns out he became one of our board chairs, Little David. I feel like we also did this incredible job along the way of growing human capital that would then spread throughout the city all of the knowledge that we gained in how to create compassionate, nonjudgmental systems and care.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Bigger than just HIV/AIDS.

SELBER: Much bigger. It was bigger than AIDS because we were the first camp to partner with Camp For All, so we literally were calling foundations, saying, “Don’t fund us. Fund Camp For All. We’ve been given a camp ourselves. We gave it back. We want to partner with them. We want to take six months. We want to fundraise with them. This is an amazing opportunity.” We were working with Sickle Cell and Easterseals and Leukemia and all these other camps cross-training, so we would be the prevention education training for everyone at Camp For All and ultimately had to develop teen prevention sexuality camps for all of those kids as they got older. All of the curriculum that we were developing, it turns out worked for everyone.

SCHWARTZENBURG: “Fill in the blank.”

SELBER: Of course, of course. We got to partner with Peggy Smith at Baylor Teen Clinic, at Planned Parenthood. I mean, really, everybody was working together so much that Sandy Kessler from SEARCH [Homeless Services] called me one day and said, “Why are you fighting over that little pool of money? Come to my
office. I want to show you something.”

She literally took two days and did nothing but tutor me on HUD, Housing and Urban Development dollars and housing dollars. We already had housing. We had Beecher-Wilson, but this was really an opportunity to partner with other branches of the government to begin to do housing that also addressed mental illness and substance abuse, which was where the disease was moving.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What happened with that?

SELBER: We built Friendly Haven. We built Project LifeRoad. We ended up operating 30 units inside of SEARCH for SEARCH because we became really, really good at housing and really helping people become fully independent. The goal was, “This is temporary, and if you don’t play by the rules, we’ll find people who will play by the rules.” We had lots and lots and lots of great success stories of families that are fully integrated.

One of the people that comes to my mind more than anyone is Dena Gray, who was part of so much of this and ended up in my office one day, and I’m like, “Don’t worry. You’ve got all these skills and all these talents,” and now she’s running Triangle Area Network [TAN] in Beaumont, Texas. Hundreds of those stories. Hundreds of people that are —

SCHWARTZENBURG: What was the story about when you bought the land?

SELBER: Great story. Patty Armstrong and I had been driving around looking for land, to actually build from the ground up. Because of a lot of HUD restrictions, we really wanted to build something much more sustainable that would last a long time. So we were driving through Freedmen’s Town, and we were looking at land all through there, and I just kept saying to Patty, “I feel like we’re going to
be displacing too many people. I can’t do this. This is not right. Let’s keep looking.”

So we started driving through midtown, which was like a war zone, and noticed that there were these two pieces of raw land across the street from one another. We still don’t disclose the street because of the confidentiality of the people living there. It was like $4 or $5 a square foot. We were like, “Okay, bad neighborhood, but we’re going to build something beautiful.”

So we go. We meet with the gentleman who is owner of this property, older, oil guy. I’m calling and I’m calling, and I can’t get an appointment with him. Finally, I said to the secretary, and I’m probably crying at this point, because we really want this land, and I tell her what’s going on and we want to build AIDS housing, and the phone goes radio silent. I kind of hear her crying, and she said, “I’ll make the appointment. I just lost my son to AIDS last month.”

So we walk in; and he’s in a wheelchair; and she’s in the room, the secretary; and Patty and I. The next thing you know, he’s like, “Well, what are you going to use this land for?”

We’re like, “Well, we’re going to build it for people who are sick.”

“What kind of sick?”

“Oh, people with chronic diseases, you know, like cancer. You know, bad diseases.”

“What kind of people?”

“Well, just women. Women and their families.”

“Are you going to have like nigger people?”

I’m like, “Well, let’s not really go there. We’re just going to help people
that are sick.”

“Okay, well, I don’t know.”

I said, “Mr. so-and-so, what’s it going to take for me to get you to sell me this land?”

“Well, hell, I don’t know. Get naked.”

So I stood up, and I remember I was wearing this bright lime blazer, and I took it off. Patty is looking at me, and the secretary is looking at me, and the gentleman looks at me and went, “Little lady, sit down. I can’t have a heart attack. If I have a heart attack, I can’t sell you the land.”

So he said to the secretary, “Get my son to — let’s close this deal.”

He said, “But you’ve got to buy both sides of the street, because if you have nigger people on one side and they’re sick, I can’t sell the other side.”

“Okay, yes, sir.”

So I called our grants officer, who was brilliant, at the Houston Endowment, Michele Sabino. Dr. Sabino was my mentor and colleague and friend. I owe so much gratitude, as does the city, for Joe Nelson and Michele Sabino — Joe was president of the endowment at the time — because they blew through lots and lots of politics and made all of this happen. I told them I had to buy both sides of the street, but don’t worry, I would hold onto the other side as an investment opportunity because what we were building would probably up the value of this area.

Well, you know what happened to midtown, and we ended up, I think, selling it for $20-something a square foot and had tremendous cash flow and reserves. Our goal was to always have 18 months’ operating in reserve so that no
client would ever have to skip a beat if a federal dollar went away, and I think we were probably one of the few agencies that were able to accomplish that. That was not because of me, not. It really was because of the kinds of people who were on our board and who really did understand the nuances of the city and legal.

Marcy Kurtz, another woman who is no longer with us and was a friend of mine for as long as I can remember, was one of the first female partners at Bracewell. Back then it was Bracewell & Patterson. She is the woman that made sure that there was pro bono legal care for people with AIDS. I mean, the cases that she took on for AIDS Foundation Houston are extraordinary, and we owe a great amount of debt to what she did, for all pro bono, not just for AIDS.

There were just giants. There were giants that would appear.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How did you create such a dynamic board?

SELBER: We were fun. I always had this theory that the board that plays together stays together. These were the days of martinis and cigars. We built our board based on playing together and staying together. We had men like Ed Smith from Foley’s, who was another one that probably you should talk to; and Cherri Carbonara from the Carbonara Group, who was brilliant, brilliant at PR [public relations] and branding; and Susan Elmore; and women like Debbie Fiorito from Chase; and Harold Wolpert, who became the darling of Broadway, who was at the Alley Theatre to make sure the arts were involved. It’s like they just kept coming, and they would bring amazing people to the board. Kim Sterling was on our board. She was our board chair when — I remember we had a gala chair who was very difficult, and I basically told that gala chair she could move right along. Kim
took me to lunch and went, “No, you fix it. That’s what we pay you for.”

I said, “No, I’m resigning.”

She said, “No, you’re not. Get your little ego out of the way. You’re fixing this. Do whatever you need to do, however you need to do it. We pay you to fix things, not to let go of people that create a social nightmare.”

So I called Shelby Hodge. Shelby, the first time I met with her, which was maybe 90 days into my job, made AIDS her thing with us, and to this day we give The Shelby Hodge Woman of Vision Award. She made everything always okay in the paper. She highlighted us, and she made everything okay. Debbie Fiorito figured out how to brand. She knew that we needed to create all new images with new faces. My face and my children’s face became this brand of AIDS all of a sudden; that “It’s not what you think.” We had people on our board who were unbelievably gifted in real estate.

We would go every single year for a weekend for a board retreat, and if you didn’t go to the retreat, you weren’t on the board. They would vision what the next year would look like, because we were accomplishing things so fast. They were also a part of solutions.

I’ll never forget. Don Poole, who is now chief finance officer at the Alley, was our finance officer, and every year he was like, “No, you can’t do that,” “No, you can’t do that.”

Year four, I walked into his office, and I said, “Okay, this year at the board retreat, you’re not going to open your mouth, because I’m upping the budget by a million dollars, and I don’t know where the money is going to come from, and you’re not going to open your mouth at this board retreat other than to
be positive and supportive. Are we clear?"

“Okay.”

That was the retreat where Dr. Sabino came and challenged our board of directors to look at HIV as chronic-disease management and to expand into diabetes and hep C. We had not had salary increases or infrastructure or anything, and so we wrote a capacity-building grant to the Houston Endowment for $1 million to just let us keep our staff so they don’t go somewhere else, up our salaries to parity, get computers, everything we needed to do to take it to the next level.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Infrastructure, basically.

SELBER: Infrastructure. We had never focused on ourselves as an agency and what we needed to do to be agile and able. Michele came and challenged the board and challenged us to go raise $1 million. No one knew that I had put the grant in to the endowment for the million. Of course, just because we put a grant in doesn’t mean you’re going to get the grant. Again, we had Joe Nelson, and he really got it. He really understood what was happening. He spent a lot of time touring and understanding, as did Michele.

The board went into closed session immediately. We had no agenda at that point. They figured out how they were going to raise $1 million, and each of them took their parts, and each of them did exactly what they said they were going to do. The stock market was booming, and we created this campaign called The Shares of a Lifetime. For $1,000 a share, you could invest in the future of chronic-disease management. You could go all over the city, and you’d see these shares on people’s walls.
At the World AIDS Day lunch, the National AIDS Fund threw out a challenge, live, for $100,000. Dynegy immediately matched it, through Debbie Fiorito, and challenged any other company to meet their challenge, at which time Elyse Kalmans and Rachel Tober stood up for Enron, and they matched it. All of it had been prearranged from behind the scenes, and no one knew that the other was, other than the National AIDS Fund.

I said, “If you’ll throw out a challenge of 2-to-1, that you’ll give us $100,000 if I can find $200,000.”

She said, “I’ll do it, and I’ll fly in and I’ll do it live.”

That day, the endowment gave us $800,000, so we raised $1.1 million at lunch. Yeah, it was mind blowing. I mean, I remember like yesterday, we all went to lunch afterwards and just wept. We just kept crying because it just was so — four years, who knew? I mean, we knew we needed to do it. We had no idea how many great people there were in Houston with such big hearts that just kept stepping up. It was the best of humanity. AIDS was the best of humanity. It was the hardest. There was so much loss.

Sometimes I’ll pull out that black book, and I just can’t believe all the people that died so young because of ignorance and hate and anger and stupidity. If AIDS teaches us anything, it’s we can’t live as humans when there’s ignorance and hate. We can’t survive as a species. It’s impossible, because there will be another AIDS. Maybe that’s what this political environment is today in the year 2019, is being divided and conquered instead of pulling together like we do with AIDS and hurricanes. I think that’s the norm of how humans want to feel.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What’s the black book?
SELBER: My black book. Back in the days, we all had black books, Day-Timers, and it had everyone’s handwritten contact information, phone numbers. I still have mine. It’s the only thing that didn’t flood during Hurricane Harvey in my storage unit. Everything else from AIDS Foundation is gone; but that black book, I still have.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Your contacts.

SELBER: Yeah.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Looking through those contacts.

SELBER: Yeah, most people are gone, most in that particular book. I think everyone who talks about this has that same story of everyone is gone. They lost their partners, their friends, their family members. Our tagline was “Everyone knows someone.”

SCHWARTZENBURG: That was the branding?

SELBER: That was a branding campaign, was “Everyone knows someone.” My gifts and talents were, I was able to speak. I could get up in front of an audience and translate and dispel myths. I remember when people thought that because there were new therapies, that we had the cure. I had a really good friend who worked for M&M’s and would ship me many bags of M&M’s, thousands of them, and wherever I would go speak, we would write prescriptions. Two reds twice a day with no orange juice. One green, this is going to cause diarrhea. Three black. Three browns. Whatever a combination would look like. Must be eaten with food. Has to do it at 3:00 in the morning. Everybody would have a different one, and they would be put on combination therapies for a week.

Just try and do this for a week, and then you tell us about the cure. Be
ready for wasting syndrome. Be prepared to lose 30 pounds on this medicine. Be prepared to throw up on this medicine. Be prepared to have severe, severe diarrhea. If you’re a woman, be prepared, you may get lipodystrophy in the back of your neck, a big chunk of fatty — I still have people stop me in grocery stores from The Junior League, saying, “Are you that lady that had us do AIDS treatment?”

I’m like, “Yeah, that’s me.”

We were able to really translate and make it much more like cancer.

SCHWARTZENBURG: “Step inside. See what it’s really like.”

SELBER: See what it’s really like, yeah. I mean, this isn’t “Oh, boy, there’s a cure.” There is no cure. There was no cure. Today we certainly have come a long way, and we have prophylactic opportunity. None of that was a possibility. Latex. Latex is your friend. We created a campaign, and I will give it to you for the archives, if you’d like it. They were CD’s [compact discs]. CD’s had just come into play. It was called “Think Negative,” and when you opened it up, there would be two condoms, a little, skinny pack of lube, and all prevention messaging. How to use a condom, how to use a dental dam, whatever it would be, and they were CD’s. Fantastic campaign. In fact, I left a few behind in Tel Aviv, Israel, and they wanted them, as well. We were shipping to random places these CD’s, and it won all kinds of awards for creativity.

But look, at the end of the day, we had Mike Mizwa, who now runs Baylor International Pediatric AIDS Initiative, and if there was ever a creative visionary, larger-than-life human being with a heart so huge that could, in the oddest of times, make you laugh in the oddest of ways, we had Mike. I was very fortunate.
I had a team that all I had to do is say, “Tell me what you need, and I’ll get it. You-all create what’s necessary. I’ll find the funds.” Very fortunate that this team was data driven. We formed this incredible team. In fact, John Huckaby, who directed client services, is now running AIDS Foundation Houston again. He worked with our team, and he understands how it can be.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Can you talk about when you arrived at the AIDS Foundation Houston, what programs were in place and then how they either evolved or dropped off, they weren’t necessary anymore, new things came in? Talk about that.

SELBER: We had an education department that was doing prevention education. I myself went through prevention education, which was quite eye-opening for this little Jewish American princess Junior Leaguer. That was a big eye-opener for me. They literally had me sit for two days in a room watching videos and everything humanly imaginable because they didn’t want me to judge. Our goal was to prevent, with no judgment. We had a very large prevention education department. They were primarily in gay locations, as I recall: bars, bathhouses, streets, the Montrose. This was when I first got there. We had Beecher-Wilson, which were apartments. We had Stone Soup, which was the food program. That’s kind of what I remember the most. I don’t remember much more than that. I’m sure there was more. I don’t remember it.

Soon thereafter, education got into prisons. Mike knew that prisons were going to be happening. He could see that it would be children, so camp became within like maybe three years of my being there, two to three years. Women, we knew that was next, which is why we got very aggressive in housing. That’s
when we built Project Friendly Haven and LifeRoad because that was substance abuse, mental illness. We always had rental assistance. From when I got there, day one, I can remember signing thousands of checks, it seemed like, which my handwriting is terrible to this day. My signature is awful. We did a lot of rental assistance.

We partnered to do pretty much everything else. We would be writing these very large grants to HUD, and we would contract what other people specialized in. We would contract for case management. I mean, day one, when I got there, we were doing Ryan White case management. Everybody was fighting over who was going to do that. What ended up happening was, clients were having to go from agency to agency to agency. That didn’t make sense, so we stopped Ryan White and we moved in to HUD, and we would use either Ryan White case managers in our housing or we would find another agency doing it and contract them to do it well for us.

Lots of education. I think we were probably the earliest agency that was on the internet in chatrooms. One day, Mike and Randall Ellis called me in to the computer — this is just when chat had started — and they started chatting with someone in a gay chatroom.

SCHWARTZENBURG: On dialup.

SELBER: So we got into prevention through chat, messaging. We actually tried to partner with the pornography industry to do trailers.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What happened with that?

SELBER: It’s a very funny story. Interestingly enough, I would spend days researching porn sites at work, and I didn’t think anything of it, trying to figure, okay, who are
the producers? Who do I know in Los Angeles? Who do I know that might — I
never really could find any connections.

After I left AIDS Foundation, I ended up at Dynegy. Maybe two months
in, I get a call into the CEO’s office, and head of IT [information technology] and
Debbie Fiorito, who is chief of communications, with all these papers, and they’re
firing me. I’m like, “Why are you firing me?”

“Porn at work.”

I’m like, “‘Porn at work.’ What are you talking about?”

They pull up this log of all of these messages that got forwarded from
AIDS Foundation to Dynegy. Bestiality, I mean, you name it. I’m like, “Oh, oh,
oh, I can make that stop right now. Watch.”

I called Patty, and I went, “Patty, don’t forward any more emails to me at
Dynegy, because all the porn is coming through.”

I had to explain to them, “No, no, no, no. Here’s what we were doing, and
we were doing prevention.”

“Okay, Sara, perfect.”

I mean, I think they knew it was kind of a risk hiring me to go in and do
the kinds of things that I got to do at Dynegy, but I think they didn’t quite know
how severe it might have been. We still all laugh about it when I see them. It
was a strange world that I had entered into that turned out to be for me a new
norm of how to live life without judging and without assumptions. There were
lots of assumptions being made that hurt a lot of people. A lot of assumptions. A
lot of street talk about humans and their lives and what they were doing and what
they weren’t doing, because of a disease or a place somebody was working.
Ridiculous.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Do you think you were already kind of heading on that path, and AIDS Foundation Houston just kind of —

SELBER: I’ve always been a little bit different than the norm of growing up in my tight little neighborhood. Certainly growing up in this very small Jewish neighborhood and landing in a school where there were minimal Jews was a real shock to my system, and being in a boarding school with diplomats’ children from all over the globe and not having a clue about cultural nuances of a Muslim student or a Catholic student. I mean, the Catholics had more holidays than the Jews. It was shocking to me [laughs].

I think so. Yeah, I think so. I grew up in a home that was an environment where we were always involved in community work and giving back. It was slammed into our heads from all four of our grandparents. It was so important maybe because they had to leave their own countries due to wars, et cetera.

When I really think about it and the cumulative effects of everything in life — in college, I was held up at gunpoint. I remember not really knowing what was happening in the car. It was like that Shirley MacLaine Out on a Limb thing, like this gold thread looking down and watching it all. All I remember was a voice in my head saying, “It will be fine. Go learn how to live in the moment.” I didn’t think anything of it. I went back to the dorm and did what college kids did in New Orleans.

Then when we moved to Midland and I gave birth to my firstborn son, he at 10 months couldn’t roll over in the crib, and I knew that was a problem. So I flew home to Houston, to the Blue Bird Clinic, to see Dr. Bob Zeller. I ended up
seeing an associate who told me that my child would have a fatal pneumatic reaction at the age of five, but go back to Midland and try every kind of therapy imaginable, and so I kind of dropped out of life and did every kind of therapy imaginable.

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

SELBER [continuing]: One night I sat out on my porch in beautiful West Texas, where there’s nothing but skies, and I looked up, and like we’re having this conversation, said, “Okay, God, I don’t know how to pray. I know how to cook, but I don’t know how to pray, and from the beginning of time, the Jews have cut deals with you, so let’s cut a deal. You spare me my son’s life, and I’ll wake up every day and try to make the world a better place."

I flew home two weeks later, and it was a false diagnosis. That’s my son [indicating photograph], who is the father to my grandchildren. I think that was my tipping-point moment, and everything after that just came. Whatever I was supposed to do, whatever I’m supposed to do, it just shows up. It can be something as profound as helping someone from a different culture bury their father. It just shows up, and I kind of get out of the way. AIDS was living and loving in the moment on crack cocaine times infinity. There was no time to breathe or think. You just kept going.

SCHWARTZENBURG: When and why did you leave AIDS Foundation Houston?

SELBER: I left because we had a very nice cash in reserve; we had quite a bit of real estate; an unbelievably well-trained Mike Mizwa, who had taken, two years before, a year off, and the deal was, “Look, when you get back, I’m out. I’m going. I will have done everything I can do. I believe six, seven years, it’s time
for fresh and new.”

I had groomed my replacement. I had left the agency as healthy as humanly possible, with a phenomenal board of directors, picked up the phone, called Kim Sterling, and said, “Kim, Mike’s ready, and I’m giving you 30 days’ notice, and let’s keep it quiet for now until we can make sure that the board is going to have Mike.”

She said, “What are you going to do?”

I said, “I have absolutely no idea, and it’s not about me. This is about the health of what’s about to happen here.”

That same day, as it turns out, I had lunch with Debbie Fiorito and Priscilla Larson for the Downtown Houston Association because I was going to facilitate their board retreat. Priscilla went to the bathroom, and Debbie looked at me and said, “What do you think about these two candidates for this position at Dynegy?”

I said, “Well, based on your lack of enthusiasm, not much, but God, I wish I thought to call you about that job.”

She said, “I talked to 20 of your closest friends, and they all said you were going to drop dead at your desk.”

I said, “Well, they must not be my closest friends, Debbie, because one hour ago, I called Kim Sterling and gave 30 days’ notice.”

That was on a Wednesday, and she said, “What are you doing Friday?”

I said, “You tell me.”

I met with Chuck Watson, in my cowboy boots and my blue jeans because it was casual day at AIDS Foundation and if I’d been dressed up on a Friday, that
would have been big red flags. A week later, they made me the offer and told me I would have a Blackberry.

I said to them, “You mean like a card for Central Market where I can get blackberries? What are we talking about?” I mean, it was corporate America and a whole new language and new world and system for me. The time was right, and it showed up. I mean, it showed up. I had no idea what I was going to do. It showed up like everything else.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Anything else? Anything we missed?

SELBER: I don’t think so. I’ve always said and will always say there’s nothing professional that will ever touch those years at AIDS Foundation. Nothing, not even close, and I’ve been involved in some extraordinary moments with Katrina and Harvey. It just wasn’t sustained for six or seven years. Even when I was at Dynegy, I was still able to help all of the organizations throughout the city. I don’t think there are really words that can capture the spirit of what we all lived.

I’m thrilled you guys are doing the best you can with archiving all of this. That’s a real gift to the city and, frankly, to humanity and what we need to all be listening to every single day.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Lest we forget.

SELBER: Lest we forget.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Thank you so much for your time and sharing your story.

SELBER: Thank you. This has been fantastic.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]
[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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