

Gordon Strauss:

I think they decided that they really liked the house. They liked the area. My dad could tolerate the commute. He was working at Beckman Instruments. That's part of the reason we moved to Whittier because that's, as you I'm sure would know, is quite close to Fullerton.

And then, he found that he could tolerate the commute from Fullerton down to Orange County to the coast in Newport Beach. And then, at a certain point, that commute became much easier for him. Beckman opened a facility, oh, just sort of up on the bluff very close to where Hope Hospital is. He wasn't there all the time, but when he was coming home from there, it was like five minutes instead of 45 to 50. But I have memories for the time we lived in Newport that almost you could set your clock by the fact that he would walk in the door at 6:00 p.m.

And my dad retired from Beckman when he was, I think, 69. He was born in 1916. Anyway, he retired in the ... Oh, I'm getting confused about the years, but long enough ago that Beckman was subsequently acquired by, among others, SmithKline. The name of that company for a while was SmithKline Beckman.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

The property down in Orange County became a place where they manufactured or maybe purchased Coulter Counters, which expanded their business and part of the reason that made them attractive to the pharmaceutical company. At this point, I've long since lost track, but my dad worked within for Arnold Beckman for basically 30 years.

My dad was born in Chicago. Had a brother, and he and his family moved out to Southern California about the time that he was going to be going into, I think, junior high school. Maybe he was 10. Yeah. It would have been like maybe like 1926. He was born in '16.

Initially, they went down to San Diego and La Jolla but fairly quickly settled up in Los Angeles, and he met his lifelong best friend, a guy named Harrison Stephens, and they went to junior high together. They went to L.A. High School together.

Sharon Sekhon:

So, a lot.

Gordon Strauss:

They both got into Stanford. They were at Stanford together. They were on different ships, but they were in the Navy about the same time in World War II. Harrison known as Steve was best man at my parents' wedding, and in fact, my parents ended up getting married in his ... my father's one that is my grandfather's living room. My dad had been all set to convert to Catholicism. My mom was a Roman Catholic, and then in the weeks leading up to their nuptials, the priest she was seeing for pre-nuptial counseling made a pass at her. And this just totally, totally shocked and dismayed everyone.

I mean my mom was raised so that priests were up there just a shade below the angels in terms of esteem, and so this really shook her. She could not set foot in a Catholic church for seven years. And so, any thought my dad had of converting just ended at that moment, and so that's why they got

married in my grandfather's home where his best friend's father was a justice of the peace, and that's the case.

So that when I was born, she had not yet reconciled herself to the situation with the Church I don't think. But in any a case, I was not baptized at birth or any of that, and by the time she had made that reconciliation, I was old enough that the rules at that time, so I had to make the decision for myself.

Anyway, getting back to it. So, my dad who had a Jewish background but not very strong in the sense that his father died early. He and his brother were sent by their mother to like a military academy not a place where you're going to reinforce a sense of your Judaism at all. It's funny. He and his brother ended up marrying a pair of sisters, and my grandmother, Margaret, came from a family that was Jewish, but she was a self-styled intellectual, an artist and pianist, and she kind of more or less rejected organized religion so that much later on, when we were sort of trying to understand our backgrounds, it turned out that the surest indication of the Jewish part of the heritage is that's the country club that my grandfather joined in L.A., the one that was sort of for Jews. But there was really nothing else that was a kind of a tip off in that regard.

So, anyway, my dad's idea to convert was not because he was really converting. It was just that he was not really practicing any religion at all that I knew of and then rejected the Catholicism with what happened to my mom happened.

Well, when we moved to Whittier, you know that Whittier aside from being the home of Richard Nixon, gasp, was also a very strong area for the Friends Church. And so, when we lived in Whittier, my dad became a Quaker.

Sharon Sekhon:

Wow.

Gordon Strauss:

And by then, my mom was reconciled to and was attending Mass on Sundays but had not gone through whatever process would allow her to receive communion. So, most Sundays, we went with my mom to the Catholic Church, but every now and again, we'd go with my dad to the local Friends meeting. And it was an interesting kind of thing, and that lasted for as long as we lived in Whittier.

When we moved down to Newport, I mean his interest in the Friends Church didn't go away, but his willingness to drive all the way back up on a Sunday was not there. At least that's my understanding of it, and so he more or less kind of went back to the sort of Sundays playing tennis rather than going to church that had been his practice. And so, as a family, we, of course, would all go to Mass on like Christmas and Easter, but for him, usually not the rest of the time.

And one of the things as a little kid that I appreciated is it was all in English because that was a time when the Catholic Mass was still being said in Latin.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

You know?

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

And it actually played a role in my eventually going to work for Wyatt Frieson at Partners for Progress. When I started in college, my birthday's in October, so I was a freshman. I was still 17. It was 1965. And so, the draft was very much a reality, but I had not yet registered for the draft because I hadn't yet turned 18. And in that first, oh, month or so that I was up at Stanford and it was exposed to a whole variety of interesting more senior people, the RAs in the dorm, and other kinds of things, I had to come to terms with registering for the draft.

And so, I registered originally as a conscientious objector, and I justified that in part because of my dad's having been a member of the Quaker Church and my having attended Friends meetings for those years in my life that I did. Well, so now we jump ahead to the end of my freshman year in college, and I was expected to get a job in the summer. Previous summers, I had worked at a neat little store right down on the beach in Newport Beach, but I think I and maybe my parents felt it was time to move on from that. And so, the job I actually got initially was with one of the big sort of, what are they, sort of airline and military contractors, Northrop.

Sharon Sekhon:

Aerospace.

Gordon Strauss:

Yeah, aerospace, exactly. And it was a kind of a simple relatively do-nothing job, but I was, hell, an 18-year-old kid who'd never had that kind of a job before. I was sort of picking pieces out that were in on shelves for the people who were machining parts. And they would tell me what they needed, and I got it. And when they were done, they'd bring it back and I refilled it. And it wasn't long where I was finding that pretty boring, but and then, at some point, I stopped to think, "Well, now, wait a minute. Here I am signed up as a conscientious objector, and I'm working for an aerospace company that among other things, is a military contractor. And there's just something just inconsistent about that."

So, I quit that job, and then needed to find something else to do. And it was about that time, I'm not sure under what circumstances, my dad met and knew Wyatt Frieson, but they did know each other. And so, he was aware that Wyatt was starting or about to open this sort of service outfit called Partners for Progress, and Wyatt needed somebody since he was otherwise employed, somebody who could sort of man that office, initially. And so, that person became me.

And I got a kick out of the fact that you dug up that old L.A. Times article back at a time when I had a lot more hair and it was black. But it captured very much sort of I was there some time in the morning, some time in the afternoon, went out, kind of researched places that might provide either jobs or training for African-American members of the community in Santa Ana, which is where that office was. It was striking and so much a part of the times. I mean that article came out in 1966 and the number of the time the word Negroes appeared in the article, it was clear that nobody thought twice about that. That was I think a ways before the idea of Blacks and Black power and all that had sort of emerged but not that much before it.

And but that was my summer, most of my summer of 1966, in the year between my freshman and sophomore years. So, the article refers to me as a sophomore, but I think we would now call me a rising sophomore. I mean that was probably the last summer that I lived at home because in the winter-

spring or maybe it was spring-summer of '67, the following year, I had the good fortune to go to one of Stanford's overseas campuses in France. And so, I was there from spring through summer of 1967.

Sharon Sekhon:

Where in France?

Gordon Strauss:

It was in Tours.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

T-O-U-R-S or-

Sharon Sekhon:

I know Tour.

Gordon Strauss:

... on the Loire River. I mean I had to start taking French once I applied and knew that I was going, so it was not a strong background for me. But it wasn't required at that time that you be a French major or that you have a lot of experience.

And they structured it so you went to school Monday through Thursday, you had three-day weekends to allow you to travel, a lot of trips up to Paris and sometimes, elsewhere. They had field trips. I remember we had a field trip to Rome, a field trip to England, and a three-week break between the quarters. So, it was a terrific experience, but it meant that I was not home for that following summer. And by the time you got to the summer after my junior year, those two summers I was now living with three roommates in various parts of Palo Alto or East Palo Alto.

So, that summer of 1966 when I had the opportunity to work at Partners for Progress and get to know Wyatt Frieson was very special to me in a lot of ways, in part because it was the last summer I lived at home.

I'm delighted to hear that. From time to time, I continued to learn new things about my mom and my dad that they weren't especially reticent one way or the other, but they did a lot of things without seeking a lot of credit. And that kind of modesty meant that there continued to be sort of surprises.

Now, some of the things that my father did of necessity gave him a certain amount of limelight if you will. He spent 10 years on the city ... No, no. The school board in Newport or Newport-Mesa once it was a combined school board, and then subsequently 12 years on the City Council.

He was a Democrat, so on the City Council, right? So, no way that this Republican community where he was probably the only Democrat on the City Council was going to be given the usual two-year term as mayor. I mean the mayor was selected from amongst the City Council.

But in his last year on the City Council, a woman who was in line to be the mayor offered him one of her two years. And so, he had a year that he thoroughly enjoyed as a mayor of Newport Beach, and it was such a cool thing that she was willing to do that.

I'm delighted to hear that. From time to time, I continue to learn new things about my mom and my dad. But they did a lot of things without seeking a lot of credit, and that that kind of modesty meant that there continue to be sort of surprises.

Well, some of the things that my father did of necessity gave him a certain amount of limelight if you will. He spent 10 years on the City ... No, no. The school board in Newport or Newport-Mesa once it was a combined school board, and then subsequently 12 years on the City Council. As a temp-

Sharon Sekhon:

Wasn't he mayor?

Gordon Strauss:

Well, he was a Democrat, so on the City Council, right? So, no way that this Republican community where he was probably the only Democrat on the City Council was going to be given the usual two-year term as mayor. I mean the mayor was selected from amongst the City Council.

But in his last year on the City Council, a woman who was in line to be the mayor offered him one of her two years. And so, he had a year that he thoroughly enjoyed as a mayor of Newport Beach, and it was such a cool thing that she was willing to do that.

Not that I can recall, but you got to remember that, I mean, we lived in Newport Beach, which was a pretty darn white area. We'd moved from Whittier, and I don't have a clear memory of a lot of African Americans in Whittier, but it certainly had a fair amount of-

Sharon Sekhon:

Mexican Americans.

Gordon Strauss:

... Mexican Americans, Latinos. I went to school there for a little bit of kindergarten all of first, second, and third grade and most of fourth grade, and I don't recall having any African-American classmates. But I certainly had kids in my class who were of other ethnic backgrounds, but I'm stretching my memory a bit to go back to that.

And when I moved down to Newport Beach, that any degree of kind of diversity all but disappeared.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

And but again, I wasn't terribly aware of that. I wasn't really thinking about that. As a somewhat shy kid, I remember being, well, I wouldn't say I was bullied, but I was certainly hazed should we say at the bus stop where I would catch the bus from where we lived over to Newport Elementary, which was over right on the water so that the playground was this black top because just beyond the black top was the sand and then the water.

Sharon Sekhon:

Wow.

Gordon Strauss:

And it sat right next to the Catholic church that my mom would be going to, and so that was the area where I then switched late in fourth grade and went there for fifth grade. And then, they had an Intermediate School which is where I went to sixth, seventh, and eighth grade before starting high school at Newport Harbor High School.

Certainly, there were dramatic changes in Newport. When we moved there it was a sleepy, little beach community, came alive during Easter week, hadn't had a much bigger population in the summer, summer rentals, and all of that kind of thing, and then sort of went back to its sleepiness during most of the school year. And that really changed during the years.

I think it changed most, or I noticed the change most, when I went off to medical school in 1970 and returned in '74. It probably began to change even five years before that when UCI opened in 1965, but at that time, '65, Irvine was not a separate town.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

It was just named after the biggest landowning family in at least Southern California, the Irvine ranch and all of that, and it was just an extension of Newport, I think. In any event, or maybe it was unincorporated county land, but in any event, Newport had a population of around 40,000 when I left for medical school.

Sharon Sekhon:

Hmm.

Gordon Strauss:

When I came home four years later, 80,000. It may have been that because I spent less and less time at home and in Orange County from basically the summer after my freshman year, and so I was ... I could see the changes, but I didn't really live through them partly because I was in college, then I was in medical school in New York. And I'd got married just before the end of my college career, so when my wife and I moved back, at that point, my training was at UCLA, initially at Harbor General Hospital in Torrance. So, again, we were not in Orange County.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

The first place we could afford to buy was a condominium in the Valley, and so my oldest son was born in Tarzana. Stuff was going on. We'd go down. We'd visit my folks, make that drive, but I probably was not as aware of some of those things as people really living there.

... that, but it was on our way down driving along the 405 and not necessarily noticing it as much, getting used to the fact that you get off on the 55 and take that down to down into Newport Beach. And then, when you got there, things, while different, were still more like I remembered from my teenage years than they were really all that different.

We had the good fortune to have moved when I was nine to a part of Newport Beach called Lido Island, and the most striking thing there was the way people would buy these really neat homes, tear them down, and build something new. Thank God my parents were never infected with that bug. The house that we moved to in 1957 remained as it was until after my parents died, and eventually, my brothers and sisters and I emptied it out and sold it. But it was a place where, yeah, the kind of thing you're talking about, changes and stuff like that, but on a pretty small scale.

I mean if you don't mind, I'll go way back with what I know.

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

She grew up in Northern California. she was already a third-generation, born-in-California person when she was born in 1914.

Sharon Sekhon:

Wow.

Gordon Strauss:

She was born in Alameda in the Bay Area. I remember stories of her having gone to Alameda High School. We would hear from time to time the chants or something like that that were part of the Alameda High School way that they stirred up the crowd and football games or whatever it was.

Her dad, my grandfather, John Richardson, I mean while she, my mom, was a third-generation Californian, therefore, her mom was already second generation in California, her dad was, of all things, born in Hawaii. And the reason that he was is that his parents were traveling from India, where I think his dad had been in the British Army, had either retired or decided to leave, and was headed to California. And so, my great grandmother was pregnant, and they didn't get any farther Honolulu when she gave birth. So, John Richardson was born in Honolulu before moving on to California and eventually, meeting and marrying my grandmother, [Stella Blanchford 00:23:47].

And so, my mom as I say was born in 1914, and so she went to Alameda High School, and probably one of the most important things in her life, my granddad was a lovely man, but so he ... I don't know what his actual background and training was, but he was somebody ... He would spend some time as a ... I don't know whether he's ever really a miner, like for gold or anything like that, but he seemed to know a lot about that. But he was someone who I think was looking for ways to support his family. Some of the ways may not have been all together on the up and up.

So, there was a company that was selling land in Southern California. It turned out to be have some fraudulent aspects. Well, my grandfather was the secretary of that corporation, and therefore, his signature was on every document, every seeming document affirming ownership. And so, when the shit the fan, so to speak, forgive my French, the guy who ends up going to prison or to jail for this is not the people he worked for but his name because it was on all of those documents.

And so, my mom has this memory of growing up with her mom and her brother, older brother, but her dad not there. She also has memories of periodically these well-dressed men showing up and giving envelopes to her mother, which presumably were cash to help them through this period of time when the guys who didn't go to jail were essentially taking care of the family of the guy who did. So, partly for that reason, things were very, very tough.



So, my mom presumably graduated from high school if she was born in '14, 18, probably 1932-ish, something like that. She applied for and got into Stanford. Her dad had promised her if she got in that he'd paid for it, but in fact, they couldn't afford it. And that was a time when the tuition at Stanford was \$50. I guess 50 a quarter, but anyway, it's 50 bucks. And that was just totally out of the question at that point.

So, she went to Cal, University of California at Berkeley. And again, partly to be able to afford it and to help pay for her older brother going to law school, she went a year, worked a year, went a year. So, instead of graduating in four years, she graduated in eight. And in the other years, she worked in various jobs. I know the only one I know and remember clearly is that she was carrying copy from the East Bay to the Chronicle, the major newspaper in San Francisco. She wasn't writing it. She was carrying it, but she had to ride the ferry to get over there because that was before there was the Bay Bridge.

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

So, those are some of the stories we grew up hearing. Also, though, I can remember, and I don't know whether this was during one of those years when she was either in college or between or maybe it was when she was in high school, where she clearly was either working for or volunteering at some community center because I remember stories about some of the kids she worked with. I don't remember their names now, but she had all that. It's just really clear memories and including some who are certainly African American at that time.

She and my dad met before she had finished. They met in 19 either '37 or '38. He had graduated from Stanford I think in '37 and had taken some kind of a job in the Central Valley where that was the time where there were all these people from Oklahoma and the Dust Bowl immigrating to California. And this was one of the summers, I guess, or maybe it was one of the years off, she took a job very similar.

The story is he'd gone to work three days before her, but she didn't know that. And so, she just saw him as not only very tall. He was 6'1". She was about, if she was lucky, 5'1", but also, she figured he'd been there a while. And anyway, they first got to know each other and began their rather prolonged courtship there in Porterville, California.

And then, they continued to date, if you will, somewhat long distance and finally got married in 1943. That was in April of '43 just before my dad went into the Navy. Some of the details about this we have half of. That is after they died, my brother and sister and I were going through their possessions. My mom had file cabinets in what was the television room of our house, and we discovered amongst all kinds of stuff that you wouldn't want to keep for any reason ... It's like my mom never met a piece of paper that she wanted to throw away.

And it's needless to say, my mom saved all the letters from my dad. We never could find, of course, the other half, but you could infer a lot of them from what she was saying and how she was responding. And what was fascinating about that is that it introduced us to a voice, if you will, of my father that none of us knew. There was a kind of youthful, exuberant, much less restrained. You remember how you heard from Ace that my dad seemed conservative.

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.



Gordon Strauss:

Well, we laughed about that, but certainly we agreed that restrained would not be ... But I mean there was just this whole more lively kindness that sort of emerged in those letters. And I don't know whether that changed by his experiences in World War II or just what it was, but it was really, really neat to see that, you know?

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

That kind of an exchange. So, anyway, she did graduate in 1940 and then wanted to be able to continue, but that was sort of not in the cards to say the least. I don't really know exactly where she worked. I can't remember if I did know until they got married, but they got married as I say in April of 1943.

One of the stories, there was censorship of mail that was sent to anyone in the service, including in the Navy, and my dad served on a, what was it, a Liberty ship, much of it in the Pacific or in the Indian Ocean. And in order to be able to say things that they knew would not get past the censors, they developed their own code. And the code was based on the names of musical tunes that they knew so that if a letter from my dad to my mom said something like, "I was listening to one of the big band tunes," or something like that, that would mean, "We're headed towards."

Sharon Sekhon:

Oh.

Gordon Strauss:

"And this is where we're going to be." And of course, the censors wouldn't have any idea that's what it meant, so it would pass right through. There'd be evidence that they'd open the letters, and they'd stamped it, and they'd done all this stuff. But that meant nothing to them, but it was a way that my mom and dad could sort of keep each other apprised of where he was.

They had an abbreviated honeymoon, actually, down at the Hotel del Coronado, which later is a place that as a family, we might go back to. But my dad got mumps, and so it cut short the honeymoon, and it also somewhat delayed his being launched as one of those 90-day wonders in the Navy back in 1943.

Sharon Sekhon:

Oh.

Gordon Strauss:

Hey, I don't really know when I stop to think about it, whether my mom lived with her parents, lived on her own, or lived with her in-laws in that period of time before my dad got out of the Navy. What I do know is that he got out when the war was over and then applied for and was accepted to I think maybe it'd been the very first year that the Cornell Institute for Industrial Relations opened. And so, the 1946-47 year, they moved to Ithaca, New York, and my dad spent the year getting his master's in industrial relations. And by the time they returned, my mom was pregnant with me, and so I have a clear sense of what she was doing in October of 1947, having a baby, right.

Then, I don't know if they went immediately to where ... Yeah, they must have been. I mean they came back, and I was, as far as I know, I was born in Westchester as I'd mentioned to you earlier. Two years later, they had my sister, two years and nine days later, and my Sister Nancy was born. And then, that move, a series of moves, first to Whittier, then to Newport, and in that first year, we lived in Newport, my mom had my brother, who is 10 years younger than I am.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

Duncan was born in March of '57, '58. I'm, you know.

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

In any event, and so raising us, she was a Cub Scout den mother, and then she was big time into the Girl Scouts, heading up a troop in Newport, or a troop, anyway, whatever you would call that, and many of those girls remained close not only with my sister but with my mom for many, many years after that.

But she'd always harbored this wish of being able to go back to school and continue her education, and for her, the opportunity came when UC Irvine opened here just a few miles from where we were living in the fall of 1965. And so, that's the year I go off to college, and she's got a girl who's starting her junior year of high school and a son who is I think either in eighth or ninth grade. No, no, not eighth or ninth grade, who's eight or nine in maybe fourth grade, and she starts this master's program in English at UC Irvine.

And typical of my mom, she doesn't do well with the language she has to take, which is French, but she gets to know the French teacher and the French teacher's husband extremely well, and those people then became lifelong friends of my mom and dad. And it's sort of ... It's an earlier version of the story you heard from Doctor, is it [crosstalk 00:35:36]? Exactly. She was somebody who if given a chance would really connect with people, cared about them, drew her in, drew them into her and my dad's life in ways that were richly, mutually rewarding over and over and over again.

She was feisty as well, particularly if you were her son. She wanted to continue, and so she started at Irvine when she was, I think, 51, and it took three or four years, so she was 54 maybe 55, wanted to go on for a doctorate. "Oh, no," they said, "You're too old for that."

And so, then she began what was then a 25-year or so teaching career, and as I think I indicated it in one of my emails, one of her first year or two, I'm not sure how long she was there, was at Cal State Fullerton.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

And so, I don't know how long Ace thought she had been there, but it wasn't very long that she had been there at all.

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

In any event, I don't know whether the drive was just more than she wanted to put up with or just what the story was, but after a year or two at Cal State Fullerton, she then came down to the part of Orange County that's closer to where we lived. She taught for, I guess, a year or two maybe at Orange Coast College.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

The Community College that I knew of best when I was living there, and then a very long stint at Golden State Community College in Huntington Beach, where as I understood it, she was the first part-time faculty member ever granted any kind of tenure, which either makes no sense at all, but anyway, that's what I was told, and where she taught English and composition and then eventually was creating classes, including some design to attract women who had not gone on to college to consider sort of coming back to education later on.

I know, and I don't think this is necessarily part of Golden State, but at a certain point in time, particularly during and after the Vietnam War when they were ... Garden Grove was a real sort of place where a lot of the Vietnamese came and initially settled, she spent some time teaching English as a second language in that community, that which may have been volunteer work. I'm not entirely sure of that.

And then, of course, she was the campaign manager for my dad in all of his elections, sort of organizing coffees and him appearing in various parts of the community whether it was when he was running for the school board or for the City Council. So, she was a very much behind the scenes person in a lot of his public service as well as those things that she did herself.

Now, my dad died in 1995, and in the two years between his death and hers, she died in October of '97, she did an absolutely fantastic thing. She at least says, and I'll take her word for it, that at some point before he died, my dad gave voice to the idea that he felt he just hadn't done enough, which is of course laughable considering all that he had done.

Besides those elected offices, he'd set up summers in Sacramento, summers in Washington programs for students from places where he been. He'd served on the various boards, partly through his connection with Arnold Beckman. He had connections at Cal Tech. He served on their board for a while. So, the idea he hadn't done enough was just so laughable, but nevertheless, because he managed their money and while Ace I think was flattering my dad and thinking that he had some sort of a technical job at Beckman, as his lifelong friend, Harrison Stephens, said at the celebration we had after my dad's death, my dad worked for a highly technical company without having a technical bone in his body.

He was hired to do employee relations and eventually finished off being a vice president for administration and over those years, became a trusted friend and confidant of Arnold Beckman. But my mom, when my dad died, I can remember going out there to comfort her and all that in the first days and weeks afterwards, and she was wondering how we're going to pay the bills and stuff like that. So, I looked into the trust that he had set up for them, and I assured her ...

She was able to take a chunk of that estate and to create the Donald A. Strauss Scholarship Foundation. She did this not only to honor my dad's name, but one of her connections with Irvine is that she was a member of the UC Irvine Alumni Association. And her connection with it was eventually most strongly through the Alumni's Association's scholarship program, which I don't know if technically she ran it, but I think practically speaking, she did.

And through that experience, she developed some pretty clear ideas on how she wanted to set up the Strauss Foundation Public Service Scholarship. And so, what she did was to create this entity which gave pretty hefty awards. I mean 10,000 bucks back in 1997 was a great big award.

She'd picked 10 California colleges and universities. They selected three nominees, sent them to the foundation, the foundation would select one, and those people would then carry out that public service project where it was the basis for selection along with good grades and leadership. And she was there to help pick the first class. Pardon me. I get choked up about this.

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

But anyway, she called every one of them when they were selected to personally let them know, which sort of set a tone of not being sort of stuffy and formal but of being more personal, and in the ensuing years, after she died the following fall, my brother and sister and I have picked up that tradition. The number of scholars now each year is somewhere between 12 and 15, and my brother, sister, and I divide up, and we make those calls every year to carry on that tradition. So, that has turned out to be just an amazingly great thing that she did.

One of the best days of the year is in the spring, in April, we have all of the current year scholars come back and meet with the trustees, and they tell us how their year went, how the project went. They got 10 minutes to tell us, 10 minutes of Q&A. It's a full day if there is 10, 12, 13 of them, and that day, I mean if there's ever a day where you want to feel good about the future of this country in terms of people who have public service and leadership potential, I mean, it's a fabulous experience.

And over the years, those are some of the highlights I would say going back from long before I knew my mom till right up to the very end. But she was a powerful figure and exerted a powerful almost always positive kind of influence. But she could be hard-nosed, and sometimes, that was great. I mean in the first year of the foundation, you would see San Diego wanted to take a thousand bucks for kind of support, and my mom basically had no problems at all saying to them, "Uh-uh (negative)."

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

"You're either going to give all of that to the scholar, or we're not going to give you anything, and you'll just be out." So, she could be very tough in the service of things that she believed in.

On the other hand, I have to say that at one point, when my first wife and I were just splitting up and getting divorced, I have this memory of this perfectly awful conversation between my mom and me where I was talking about how badly I was feeling, and she was saying, "I'm glad." My dad was much more, in my view, balanced about that.

Sharon Sekhon:

Yes.

Gordon Strauss:

But so, that toughness and that sometimes rigidity, she could be at times unpleasant, but those were in my experience truly the exceptions. I mean that example I've just given you stands out because it was so exceptional, and what was not at all surprising is that my mom and dad really reached out to my former wife and made it clear that she was still part of the family as far as they were concerned, welcome at any time ...

So, that what I think I take away from them is that in the notion that the glass is half empty or half full, it's always has been half full. I mean these were people who believed and transmitted this notion that your attitude makes a hell of a difference in terms of how you experience life, and if there was ... I'm not sure I can think of anything that over the long run has been as beneficial, certainly to me and I assume for my brother and sister, as that sense that a positive attitude will get you through just a hell of a lot.

Newport Beach and Watts were not only 30, 40 miles apart, but they were eons apart in all kinds of ways. I mean I've told you that when we moved to Newport, I didn't have a sense of there being any African Americans that I knew in my schools. It was a pretty lily-white community, and I'm not sure how different that really is now. So, we read about them.

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

It was more one of those things read about than truly experienced. There's a lot of talk about white privilege and those kinds of things, and that's one of the manifestations of that.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

No question that they and I grew up in sort of in the center of the widely accepted, mainline, white part of this country.

... oh, much, much later in life, that certainly I came to appreciate some of what I had gotten through no merit but just as a function of skin color, education, wealth, and therefore, where we live.

I think it's very hard. I've had the great, good fortune, since I was in training in my psychiatric training, almost accidentally I got exposed to something called Group Relations.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

And this was a way of taking a look at group and organizational dynamics. It started initially in England by something called the Tavistock Institute, so it's sometimes referred to as Tavistock Group Relations. In this country, a guy from the Tavistock who helped bring it to the U.S., A. Ken Rice, A. K. Rice Institute, carries on that tradition, and one of the things it does is it combines in a very interesting way two things you wouldn't necessarily assume would be connected, a deeply psychological and deep psychoanalytic way of looking at the human behavior in groups combined with open systems theory and then the idea that a system unless it's open to input from the environment, if it's a closed system, eventually, it's going to die.

And so, this rather unusual combination, and I'd gotten interested in it. I went to conferences here and in England. Got interested enough that I've been trained, and I've helped put on some of the Group Relations conferences.

Sharon Sekhon:

Sure.

Gordon Strauss:

And so, it really encourages people who go to these conferences or who work them to have to come to terms with what is either projected into us or more typically what we want to get rid of and project into others. And so, there's been I think to some extent a greater need or willingness to take a look at some of these things through my experiences in Group Relations, and in fact, right now, for the last six to eight weeks or maybe couple months, the A. K. Rice Institute has been having every other week sort of community meetings in which people have been trying to grapple with some of the white supremacy, white privilege, how is that affecting us as members of this organization, and more generally, how can we bring this more into the work we do?

So, but again, I'm flattered that you think I am more open to some of this, but I mean I think there's a reason to some extent, and it has to do with at least in part by the way I was raised but even more recently, this work in Group Relations which is kind of a way to continue to examine, "What am I thinking, feeling? What am I ignoring? What am I putting into other people?" as a way of sort of avoiding that part of myself.

Psychiatry has changed a lot since I was trained. I had the great, good fortune to train in a place and in a time where a general psychiatrist was expected not only to make a diagnosis and write a prescription but also to be a therapist. I currently live, work, and am a professor. To a certain extent, we try and continue that, but it's very clear that there's an awful lot of my colleagues who are quite content just to do 15-, 20-minute visits. You know.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

"How you doing? Fine. Here's a refill. Goodbye."

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

I have no interest in practicing that kind of psychiatry, never have, but I do recognize that I'm in the minority if not a bit of a dinosaur.

I mean if he hasn't gotten it, he certainly deserved it. I think that, and again I'm embarrassed to say I don't really know/remember what the connection was between him and my dad, but I do know that when I had quit Northrop and I was trying to figure out what to do, that my dad suggested, "Well, why don't you give Wyatt Frieson a call?" And I did. We met. I think he decided that particularly since I was willing to work for nothing that-

Sharon Sekhon:

That's the price.

Gordon Strauss:

... hiring me to, "Manage this little office," and go out into the community, try and line up places where African Americans could get, as I say, either jobs or training, some kind of educational connection. Now, I have to tell you, in that summer, there weren't very many people who actually came through the door. I did whatever I could, but here I am this 18-year-old white kid and sort of stretching my wings so to speak, could set up the office, could go out and make some contacts, but it's probably laughable in retrospect.

But I did have a contact with Wyatt. I don't remember how often we would meet, but probably once a week, if not more. And what I remember ... Now, keep in mind, 54 years ago, my memory of this is going to be somewhat attenuated, but he was committed to this without any question, really sincere in his beliefs, and in retrospect, I don't think I appreciate it as much at the time, but my hunch is that in retrospect, he was new to this is probably I was.

Sharon Sekhon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon Strauss:

And so, that was part of the reason he was willing to take this kid, white kid at that, to staff his office.

... kind of remind you the situation with my mom and my dad when they met Porterville, where I don't know how long Wyatt had been doing this before I came along, but I figured, "He's the boss. He knows all about this, and I got it sort of bust my ass to make sure that I perform up to his level on my dad's expectations."

Sharon Sekhon:

Yeah.

Gordon Strauss:

And but my sense is that he was certainly very supportive of what I was doing and trying to do, gave me the latitude to do what I could. It was something that I really appreciated. I mean I don't know if I had told him about my feeling kind of bored at Northrop, that after I figured out how you pull stuff off the shelf and get it and put it back, that was a pretty boring job. Boring is not the way I would describe the situation at Partners for Progress.



Now, once I got everything set up and I'd gone and I had these connections and there were hours when nobody came in the door, yeah. But in terms of the latitude I was given, in a funny sort of way, I had ... I was treated in some ways by him the way we at the Donald A. Strauss Scholarship Foundation try and treat our scholarship winners. We hand them this award, all but 2,000, which we give them when the year's over, and we say, "You've got a plan. Typically, you've got a timeline. You've got a budget. We're here to help if you need it but go. See what you can do."

And we don't over sort of manage them at all. In fact, we lost Cal Tech as one of our schools because they wanted us to be more controlling with the budget and other kinds of things of the students than we were prepared to do. So, anyway, my experiences with Partners for Progress, when I think back on it, was very similar. Nobody was handing me any money. I mean part of the deal was that I was able and willing to do this just gratis. But more importantly, he told me what he wanted, and I did my best to sort of make that happen.