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Oral History Project

Ruth Harriet Jacobs, PhD: An Outrageous and Courageous Woman

At age eighty-two, Dr. Ruth Harriet Jacobs is living outrageously and courageously. Her days are filled with volunteer work, speaking, teaching, publishing, and counseling, and she stands out among her peers as an accomplished academic, leader, educator, and advocate. When I met Jacobs for our interview, she donned a button that read “I AM AN OUTRAGEOUS OLDER WOMAN” and wore purple from head to toe. Jacobs’s boldness and her choice to wear the color purple was reminiscent of Jenny Joseph’s poem “Warning”, which begins, “When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple.” My first impression of Jacobs as bold, outgoing, and active was strongly reinforced as I learned more about her accomplishments and lifestyle.

Throughout the course of my interview with Dr. Jacobs I was struck repeatedly by the sincerity of her goal to inspire and help others. Jacobs’s desire to help others is driven by her gratitude toward the people who helped her throughout her difficult childhood. “I was helped when I was a child. My life could have been a disaster,” Jacobs stated. She explained that she and her brother “went through a series of bad living arrangements” after their mother’s death and were eventually placed with their maternal grandparents by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Jacobs found support, encouragement, and inspiration in several teachers throughout her difficult childhood. She singled out her eighth grade teacher from

Lawrence, Massachusetts, Miss Hutchings, as a role model explaining that she “treated me like I was smart, I thought I was dumb. And she liked my writing.” Jacobs also stated that the neighborhoods where she lived with her grandparents were poor “and the schools were very bad.” She reflected on the lack of opportunities she had at Roxbury Memorial High School because of her economic status and gender;

In those days, there was no help for people like me, no way that you could get a college scholarship. We were just shoved into the commercial course. We were expected to be secretaries, or clerks, or to have low level jobs as women.

Although her career opportunities were limited by her social position and her society’s gender constraints, two teachers at Roxbury Memorial recognized Jacobs’s potential;

There was a marvelous history teacher who did teach a course for the commercial course students. And he said to me “you should be in the college track,” and I said to him, “yeah but I do have to make a living after I graduate.” And he said “well, at least I’ll put you in my college history class.” And he talked to a wonderful English teacher named Sophia Palm and I was in her college English course. And because of that I became the coeditor of the school literary magazine and the yearbook, and I discovered that I was a writer.

The confidence that Jacobs gained through these academic experiences inspired her later endeavors as a writer and educator.

As her high school career came to an end, Jacobs prepared to enter the workforce. Jacobs explained that Roxbury Memorial “let us out halfway through our senior year in the commercial course if we could get a job.” As expected, Jacobs found a clerical job and left school halfway through her senior year. Unsatisfied with clerical work, Jacobs looked for other job options;

My friend Lenore went to Boston University and she majored in journalism. And she heard that the men who graduated Harvard and wanted to enter the journalism business became copy boys, which is when you do all of the errands, you know, the first step. But the major Boston

newspaper, which no longer exists, couldn't get these Harvard graduates because they were all going off to war. So they were using girls. And on my lunch hour I went up to the newspaper and they hired me.

The war created new opportunities for women in the journalism field, and once Jacobs had her foot in the door she began to pursue her aspirations as a writer. She began writing feature stories on the side while she was a copy girl. She explained with pride that after working a year for the paper she was given a position as a reporter at age nineteen;

[The newspaper] would have to pay me extra for my stories by the inch and the paper discovered by the end of my first year that I was making more than the beginning reporters because they were paying me my copygirl salary and then these stories that I was writing on the side added up. So they made me a reporter, and I was the youngest reporter in the city of Boston.

As a journalist, she covered the state house, presidential elections, and city hall, and she interviewed important people such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. Jacobs stated, "I had wonderful opportunities which might not have occurred except for the fact that the men were off to World War II." If not for the war and the lack of available male reporters, a woman would not have had the opportunity to cover such important news stories. It is also remarkable that Jacobs became a journalist with only a high school education, primarily in the commercial track. With immense perseverance and talent she was able to overcome the challenges that her level of formal education and her gender posed to achieve her dream of being a writer. Her success as journalist was undoubtedly due to both her gift for writing and the opportunities for women in the workforce at the time.

The lack of prospective copy boys in the journalism field, and the consequential hiring of copy girls is an example of the changes in the work force during World War II and the opportunities that arose for women. In *America's Working Women*, Rosalyn

Baxandall and Linda Gordon explain that women who were “previously restricted to lower-paying, unskilled, service jobs” gained access to high-paying skilled jobs in industry during the war¹. This was especially true in the industrial labor force, as the demand for machinery increased while available man power decreased. However, Jacobs’s experience is an excellent example of the way that the war also increased women’s opportunities in skilled jobs outside of the manufacturing industry.

Jacobs married at age twenty-three and became pregnant with her first child at age twenty-four. She explains that “in those days women stayed home with their children if their husbands could afford it. It was a different world.” This social expectation, and complications during her pregnancy, caused Jacobs to leave her job as a journalist and stay home with her children. When her youngest child started school, Jacobs began going to college at Boston University. She had already earned one year of credits attending night school while working as a journalist. Jacobs completed her bachelor’s degree at age forty from Boston University. She began her undergraduate education as an Education major, but in her junior year she became interested in Sociology and graduated with as a Sociology major. She then earned her doctorate in Sociology from Brandeis University at age forty-five.

The “rhetoric” used by American leaders to stress “women’s traditional roles as wives, mothers, and consumers” is described by Susan M. Hartmann in her introduction to *Women’s Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years*².

Ultimately, Hartmann argues that “the actual behavior of women increasingly deviated

¹ Rosalyn Baxandall, and Linda Gordon, with Susan Reverby, ed, *America’s Working Women: a Documentary History 1600 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995) 245.

² Susan M. Hartmann, “Women’s Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the early Cold War Years”, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America*, Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple, 1994) 86.

from the celebration of domesticity,” and Jacobs’s choice to extend her life beyond the domestic sphere by pursuing her doctorate is an example of this proposed trend³.

Although Jacobs stayed home with her children, she did not limit herself to her domestic work; instead she was compelled to pursue her academic aspirations and become an educator.

Jacobs has never forgotten the important impact that her teachers had on her life. She began her undergraduate degree as an Education major, and, although she graduated with a major in Sociology, she became a college professor. Jacobs taught at Boston University for thirteen years and was the Chair of the Sociology Department at Clark for five years. Jacobs explained her decision to be an educator as a vehicle for helping others in the way that she had been helped as a child; “I’ve always wanted to help people and teaching seemed to me like a good way of helping people... what made me want to be a teacher were the teachers who really saved my life in many ways.” Today, Jacobs continues to teach courses on creative writing, memoir writing, and aging. During our interview, Jacobs explained, “I teach in many ways. It’s not only classroom teaching, but also workshops for older people and so on.”

As a sociologist, Jacobs reflected on her experiences with her grandparents and chose to focus her research on gerontology;

Because of my early experience with my aged grand parents, and hanging out with there friends, who seemed to me like real people, I was shocked by the ageism in American society. So I started to do a lot of my work in sociology on ageing...and then I just have continued on that track...

Gerontology has continued to be central to Jacobs’s work throughout her careers as a researcher, author, advocate, and consultant. As a specialist on aging, Jacobs served as

³ Hartmann 98.

the New England representative for AARP and also as a member of AARP's National Task Force on Aging and Mental Health;

I went around New England and spoke to various organizations for free, and AARP would pay for my transportation. And then [AARP] asked me to serve on their National Task Force on Aging and Mental Health. And we publish some pamphlets and stuff like that. And I enjoyed that because they brought me to Washington, D.C. and I met people from all over the country.

Her expertise has also been sought recently by Mass Housing, the program responsible for subsidized housing in Massachusetts. Jacobs speaks at elderly housing projects as a part of a Mass Housing initiative called the Tenants Assistance Program;

You know, there's a lot of subsidized housing in Massachusetts, not only for elders but for families as well... There something called Mass Housing which has a program called TAP, Tenants Assistance Program. And they pay me to go into elder housing projects, and also sometimes projects where there are both elderly people and families, and give talks to help people and do some training. For example, in April I'm going to a large housing project that has an auditorium in Hyde Park. And I'm going to be training people who work in elder housing to understand what the needs are of elders, and how to help them and run programs for them. It's a four hour training which I'm doing.

Through both AARP and TAP, Jacobs has applied her work in gerontology and sociology as a consultant and educator. This work has undoubtedly touched the lives of many people.

Jacob's has published nine books and numerous poems and plays on aging. Her books include *Older Women Surviving and Thriving*, *Button, Button, Who Has the Button?*, *Out of Their Mouths*, *Be an Outrageous Older Woman*, *Life After Youth: Female, Forty, What Next?*, *We Speak For Peace*, *Women who Touched My Life A Memoir*, *Re-engagement in later Life*, and *ABC's for Seniors: Successful Aging Wisdom from an Outrageous Gerontologist*. Her most recent publication is the play *Happy*

Birthday: a Play for Elders Acted by Elders. She also writes an advice column titled “Dr. Ruth” in the *Senior Times*, a monthly paper for seniors in New England. All of her publications offer seniors insightful and uplifting advice, and encourage them to lead active, outrageous, and courageous lifestyle.

Jacobs’s book on displaced homemakers, *Life After Youth: Female, Forty, What Next?*, published in 1979, lead her to work on a two year project with the Wellesley Center for Research on Women in an effort to aid displaced homemakers. Displaced homemakers are women who have previously not worked outside of the home, but can no longer be financially supported by a husband because of his death, or illness, or a divorce. These women need skills to enter the workforce in order to support themselves and Jacobs’s project with the Center helped women acquire necessary skills and handle the transition from being a homemaker to a working woman. Jacobs has been an active member of the Wellesley Center for Research on Women ever since this project. She often attends lectures and seminars at the Center and uses the Wellesley College Library for her research.

During our interview, Jacobs asserted her position as a pacifist. She explained that covering the casualties during World War II as a journalist shaped her views on war. She also described her experiences as a volunteer in a Veterans’ Administration Hospital after World War II;

I did some volunteer work in the Veteran’s Administration Hospital to help people- veterans, and they were all men- who had not finished high school. And I went to their bedsides while they were recovering from the war and I got them ready for the high school equivalency exams, so they could get jobs when they recovered. But I saw all sorts of things, and a lot of guys who would never recover.

This experience made an impact on Jacobs's perception of war and is also an example of her dedication to education. Her opposition to war has continued, and she stated, "I was very active in the anti-Vietnam War effort. I went on marches and vigils and did all of the things that people did at that time." She expressed strong disapproval of the War in Iraq and explained that although she no longer participates in demonstrations, she still finds ways to express her pacifism and oppose this war.

Throughout all of her work as an educator and author, Jacobs's goal has been to help people. It seems that she has truly succeeded in doing so, and she has found her work gratifying. Toward the end of our interview, Jacobs stated;

I've had a lot of gratification because I put my address in my book, *Be an Outrageous Older Woman*, and I get a lot of mail...I've done some individual counseling of older people, not for money, but just people who need help. They'll find me somehow through my books or online or they'll hear me speak. And I try to help them somehow... My goal has been to help people.

As an author, Jacobs shares advice and offers encouragement to her readers in the form of witty prose and poetry. She is a gifted writer with a heartfelt and uplifting message; it is no surprise to me that so many readers have contacted her. I found her most recent publications on aging, *ABCs for Seniors* and *Happy Birthday*, wonderfully inspiring and humorous. One example is the poem "B is for Bolder" in *ABC's for Seniors: Successful Aging Wisdom from an Outrageous Gerontologist*;

B is for Bolder
when you get older.
Do what you want to do
let nobody step on you.
Don't do what you are told
ignore messages sold.

Be forceful and brave,
get out of your cave,

ride on a wave.
Being old, you're bright,
and have second sight.

If not now, when?
Speak up again and again
tell kids, women, and men
what is true and right.
Use senior might,
fly a bright kite,
see every sight,
dance every night,
enjoy the moonlight,
eat a tempting bite,
climb every height,
even with a cane
or arthritic pain.

You're a survivor
and a great thriver.
File shyness in a folder
Be warmer, not colder⁴.

I feel that this poem best describes Jacobs's advice for her peers and her own lifestyle. She continues to be incredibly active- speaking, publishing, teaching, and counseling- and shows no signs of slowing down. Jacobs is proud of her boldness and thrilled that others have benefited from her message. In addition to her sense of gratification regarding her own work, Jacobs also expressed both pride and satisfaction in the fact that both of her children are now "in helping professions." Jacobs's compassion for others, sincere desire to help people, and outgoing lifestyle are inspirational and she has accomplished a great deal through her hard work and talent.

Jacobs's life coincides with the time period that we have discussed throughout this course, and her personal trials and triumphs are a reflection of the experiences of an entire generation of American women. She came of age during World War II and saw the

⁴ Ruth Harriet Jacobs, ABC's for Seniors: Successful Aging Wisdom from an Outrageous Gerontologist (Greentop: Hatala Geroproducts, 2006) 5-6.

advantages that women gained in the workforce during the war. She acknowledged her society's expectation that she would leave the workforce when she became a wife and mother. She received her doctorate degree during the Second Wave of the Women's Movement. She recognized the struggles of displaced homemakers in the late 1970s and actively sought to improve their condition. She has identified ageism as a major issue in American Society and is taking a stand against it. Jacobs continues to live her life courageously and boldly, and, although many women in her generation have shared her experiences, she continues to stand out among her peers as a leader and advocate for social change.

After reflecting on all that I have learned about Dr. Ruth Harriet Jacobs through this oral history project, I have concluded that I want to be as outrageous and courageous as she is when, God willing, I am eighty-two years old.

Work cited

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