

## Sonia Pressman Fuentes

July 12, 2013; August 17, 2013; October 19, 2013;  
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ABA Senior Lawyers Division  
Women Trailblazers in the Law

**ORAL HISTORY**  
of  
**SONIA PRESSMAN FUENTES**

Interviewer: Liz Alpert

Dates of Interviews:

July 12, 2013  
August 17, 2013  
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ORAL HISTORY OF  
SONIA PRESSMAN FUENTES  
ON BEHALF OF WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LAW  
A PROJECT OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION  
SENIOR LAWYERS DIVISION

BY LIZ ALPERT  
FIRST INTERVIEW

JULY 12, 2013

Ms. Alpert: Hi. This is Liz Alpert and I am here today talking with Sonia Pressman Fuentes, and we are going to be discussing her role in the second wave of the women's movement. And today is July 12, 2013, and Sonia, you have a really interesting story about how you and your family came to this country. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, my parents were Polish Jews who lived in a *shtetl*, or village, in Poland called Pilica by the Poles and Piltz by its Jewish residents. And they got married in 1913; my father had already gone to Germany when he was fourteen- years-old to find a way to make a better living, and he returned to Poland to visit his mother. That would have been in 1912, and a matchmaker who was a cousin of my mother's introduced them. And my father went back to Germany, and they corresponded, and they got married in 1913, and returned immediately to Germany—not Berlin at that time. And a year later, my brother, Hermann, was born in Neu-Isenberg, a suburb of Frankfurt am Main. And in 1928 I was born in Berlin.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. Talking about your parents meeting through a matchmaker, isn't there a funny story about what happened on their wedding day?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, there is, if you want to go back into that. Would you like me to tell that story?

Ms. Alpert: It's a great story.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, it goes back. I have to go back a little further. My mother, as I said, lived in this *shtetl* called Piltz with her mother and father, but she lost her mother when my mother was ten-years-old. And sometime thereafter her father, whose name was something like Jacob Moshe—Dombek was his last name, or Moshe Itzhak Dombek, something like that—her father remarried. And he married a woman with a daughter of her own. And this woman had really no use for my mother. And so my mother went to live with her wealthy uncle and his wife and children in Warsaw. And she grew up in Warsaw. Now before my father was born his mother was in the *mikvah*, that's a place where Orthodox Jewish women go monthly to cleanse themselves after their periods, not that I believe they need to cleanse themselves but that's the ritual. It's like a bath or a pool. And before my father was born, his mother and another woman were in this *mikvah*, and they were both talking about being pregnant. And they agreed that if one had a son and the other one had a daughter, those two would get married when they became adults. And my paternal grandmother indeed did have a son, my father, and the other woman did have a daughter, so it was my paternal grandmother's idea—her name was Udel Ulmer—that my father would marry that woman. Well, then when my father was introduced to my mother and then went back to Germany. . . . Now, I said they corresponded, but my father didn't know how to read or write, but he got friends of his to send these beautiful picture postcards to my mother.

They had all these picture postcards of a man and a woman. I have some of them still in my albums, in a romantic scene. And on the back my father would have somebody write a romantic note to my mother. So then when they decided to get married, my father's mother was very much against it because she wanted him to marry this other woman. In addition to that, my mother was something like a year older than my father. She was also thin, which was not a plus among Jews in those days. And she had freckles which was also not a plus. So, my father's mother said to him—she was opposed to his marrying my mother—and she said to him, “I just read that a young woman with the same name, Hinda, in Warsaw, gave birth to twins.” She said, “How do you know it isn't this Hinda that you are planning to marry? And what do you know about her? She grew up in Warsaw. What do you know about her?” And she didn't want my father to marry my mother. So, this confused my father. But my father said one night he went to bed, and he had this dream that my mother's dead mother came to him in the dream and said to him “Marry my daughter. She will make you a good wife and you will be happy,” and this kind of thing. And he said he woke up from that dream determined that he was going to go through with it and not listen to his mother.

Ms. Alpert:       Something like *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Ms. Fuentes:      Exactly, right. And that he was going to marry my mother. So, meanwhile my mother, growing up in Warsaw with this wealthy uncle, . . . . He had given her some money for a dowry because in those days the girls among Jews—certainly the girls had dowries. And the uncle had given her money for a dowry. And she had this cousin who was a gambler. And he asked her to lend

him money and that he would, of course, repay it. And she foolishly lent him the money that she had for her dowry, and he lost it gambling and had no way to repay it. So, she was petrified because she was about to get married, needed a dowry, and didn't have it. She didn't know what to do and didn't say anything.

So, my father comes to the wedding and he is talking to the uncle, and the uncle keeps putting his hand in his pocket. And every time my father thought he was going to come out with the dowry, but he would come out with nothing, or he would come out with a handkerchief or with a watch. And, finally, my father asked what happened with the dowry, and he was told that there wasn't any dowry because my mother had lent it to this cousin, and he lost it gambling. So, my father felt that he had been tricked, and he remembered his mother's words, and he said, "My mother was right. . . ."

So, he took off—he ran away. This is right before the wedding. And all the townspeople started to run after him because my mother was an orphan in that she didn't have a mother, and an orphan had a certain kind of a place, and you weren't supposed to take advantage of them. And they felt that my father was shaming my mother in front of the entire community.

So, they all ran after him. And my father was wearing a top hat, and one man running after him had a cane, and he caught up with my father and it was a collapsible—they had these collapsible top hats—and he hit my father on that hat and the hat collapsed and my father stopped. And they all made my father go back and marry my mother. But when they were under the *chuppah* (that's the wedding canopy), my father said to my mother, "I am marrying you now

because I have to; these people are forcing me. But my mother was right, and I am not remaining with you, and I am going back to Germany tomorrow. By myself.” So, my mother said to herself she is just going to have to kill herself—what is she going to do? So, that’s how they got married.

And after the wedding they went to some—I don’t know what it was, some kind of a building where they were to stay overnight. And the custom in this little village was for all the people who had been at the wedding to try and look in the windows to see what’s going on. So, meanwhile my mother and my father were in this room, and my mother was slim and so she wore some kind of cotton pads to look as if she had breasts. And my father found those and came out and said, “What is this?” And he says, “You don’t have to wear anything like this.” So, they went to bed. And everything was fine and the next morning, my father—what he had said about going by himself went by the boards. And they went on the train to go to Germany, the two of them. All of a sudden, my father says, “Oh, I forgot the suitcase.” I am getting off; I have to go back and get the suitcase, and I’ll pick up the train at another station.” And off he goes. So, my mother is sitting there, and there is some man who is sitting in the train who sees her and she is sitting there and looking rather downcast. And he goes to her and he says, “You know, where are you going? What’s going on?” And she said to him, well, she just got married but her husband realized he forgot the suitcase and he went back for them, and he will come back on another train or another station. And the man says, “You’ll never see him again.” He says, “That’s an old trick. He’s taken off and you will never see him again.” And my mother says, “Oh my God.”

She's on the train; she is going to Germany; she doesn't know German; she doesn't know anybody there. What is she going to do?

And at the next station, my father comes back with the suitcase. Now, I never thought to ask him how did he catch another train and get back on. I don't know the answer to that question, but that's what he did and that is how they came to Germany.

Ms. Alpert: And, so, if that all hadn't happened, you wouldn't be here today.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, no, no I wouldn't. Or else I'd be here looking different.

Ms. Alpert: Right. Exactly. Exactly. So, they were living in Germany. You had an older brother. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah. Fourteen years older. . . .

Ms. Alpert: Fourteen years older. And then you were born in what year?

Ms. Fuentes: 1928. May 30<sup>th</sup>.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And you were still in Germany at that time?

Ms. Fuentes: Right.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. So what happened in Germany during the time that you were there?

Ms. Fuentes: Okay. So when my parents first got married, they didn't have any money; they were poor people. My father was a tailor, but they worked themselves up and by the time I was born they were well-to-do people. They had a business, which I think my father rented, but he ran it.

It was a men's clothing store and in the back, a small factory. My father ran that. My brother worked there, my mother helped, and they had just bought for investment purposes a forty-four-apartment building—forty-four-apartments in this building for investment purposes. And my father was going to run it. My



brother was collecting the rents, that kind of thing. They had servants in the home—maids—and on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1933, Hitler was named Reich Chancellor of Germany. And my brother began—when the Nazis started to come to power, my brother started to keep a diary in German shorthand in 1932. He kept it until sometime in 1935 when we were living in the Bronx. So, much of this is in my brother's diary. And I have an English translation of it, which my brother and his granddaughter, Debbie Linick, put together (she knows German). And the original in German shorthand and an English translation are in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. So, my brother—you can tell from his diary—very shortly after Hitler came to power, my brother saw the threat to the Jews and began importuning my father for us to leave.

There had also been incidents that we were aware of. We knew of one man who was taken off by the police and ended up being dead, and they forced his wife to sign that he died of natural causes. There were people that disappeared. We had a situation in our store which was really the last straw for my brother. A group of young thugs came into our store; some of them had worked there for my father. And they came in to rob the store. In that store, before it was a men's clothing store, it had been a Dresden Bank—it was called the Dresdner Bank—and there was a vault there because it used to be a bank. So, these thugs intended to put my brother and my father in the vault and to steal men's suits, coats, whatever. So, when they came in, my brother dashed to his office to call the police. His office had a glass door, so he saw one of the robbers trying to come in, but he wasn't able to make it. My brother called the

police, told them what was happening, and the police came and chased those thugs out. But, as they were leaving, they said, "*Herr* Pressman, we came this time but if such a thing happens again, don't call us. We won't come because you are Jews." So, that was the last straw for my brother—when that happened. But before that happened, my brother had been riding his bicycle not far from where the store was, and some kind of a cab called a Hanomag (certain kind of a taxi) hit my brother and he fell to the ground. And there was no serious injury, but his knee was bleeding. And a circle of people formed around him, some of whom knew him, and he heard them say "Who cares about that Jew?"

So, these are the kinds of things my brother witnessed and why he asked my father to leave Germany. Well, my father thought it would be ridiculous. He had been living in Germany over twenty years, he had the men's clothing business, he had just bought an apartment building, he was well-to-do—he wouldn't hear of it.

He said to my brother, "This will just blow over."

So, my brother decided to leave by himself. So, at this time he was nineteen-years-old, and he wanted to go, first, to London, but he couldn't get a visa to go to London. So, he went to Antwerp, Belgium where we had a cousin and—some of this I learned only more recently due to my connection with the Red Star Line Museum—but my brother really only had a visitor's visa for Belgium. He didn't have a visa to remain there. But, anyway he went to Belgium. And after he went to Belgium, my mother would write to him and say, "Things are better now. Come home. We need you in the business." And

my brother was a very dutiful son, but he wrote back to my mother and said that he read in the papers that Jews who have left Germany, when they come back, the Nazis are waiting for them at the railroad station, and they are never seen again. So, he said to my mother he didn't want to come back for that reason, but that if my mother or my parents ordered him to return, he would return. So, then they told him to return. And he was going to return when my father changed his mind. I don't know—I never asked, I don't know what made him change his mind. But my father always said he went to a small room and sat down with a small group of Nazis, and he agreed to give them our business and the apartment building for a fraction of their value and they agreed to let us go. So, it was in June or July of 1933 that we left.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And you were how old at this time?

Ms. Fuentes: Five.

Ms. Alpert: Five. Okay. And where did you go?

Ms. Fuentes: So, we went to Antwerp and we rented an apartment. And I think my brother was living in another apartment. Again, some of this I just learned recently from the Red Star Line Museum people, but so what happened then was none of us had a legal right to remain in Belgium. So, my brother was running around filing all kinds of applications for us to be given legal visas so we could remain in Belgium. What happened was there was a man named Robert de Foy who was head of an organization called the *Sûreté Publique*, which was like our FBI. He was an anti-Semite and he also didn't want people from foreign countries coming to Belgium competing with Belgium businessmen. It was my father's intention to go into the men's clothing business if he could in

Belgium and remain in Belgium. So, this Robert de Foy turned down our application to remain in Belgium. And he wanted to deport us to Poland, which would have been an absolute disaster. First of all, my parents hadn't lived there in over twenty years, and, secondly, they would have been killed there. They would have also been killed in Belgium had we been allowed to remain, but we didn't know that at the time. So, Robert de Foy gave an order to the mayor of Antwerp, a man named Camille Huysmans, who subsequently became prime minister of Belgium. He gave him an order to deport our family because he didn't allow us to remain legally. Camille Huysmans was an unusual man: he was a Socialist and he was sympathetic to the plight of Jewish refugees in Belgium. He refused to execute the order he got from Robert de Foy to deport us. So, Robert de Foy went to the federal police and asked them to deport us, and they came to our home to deport us, and we were already on the ship to come to the United States.

Ms. Alpert: And how did you manage to get on a ship to the United States? Do you know how?

Ms. Fuentes: I don't know the details of that.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. You just know that you. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: But some of it is in my brother's diary. He went to different organizations and they were helping him, but I don't remember the details off-hand. The other thing I've always known is that we came to the United States on Polish visas because my parents were considered Poles by the Germans. The Germans don't hand out citizenship like we do in the United States. Even though my brother was born in Frankfurt, my mother always told me that she had to pay

extra money for him to go to school because they were Poles.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And you were born in Frankfurt as well?

Ms. Fuentes: No, I was born in Berlin.

Ms. Alpert: In Berlin. Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: My brother in Neu-Isenburg, which is a suburb of Frankfurt. So, I was always told that we came on Polish visas. Now, when I was in Antwerp in September of 2011, I was a guest of the Red Star Line Museum. They arranged for me to meet with a Dr. Frank Caestecker, who is Belgium's leading expert on Jewish refugees in Belgium in the early 1930s. He is a professor at the University of Ghent, but he met with me at the Brussels State Archives and went over my family's—they have my family's complete file there—and went over every page with me. And he said to me that he was surprised we were able to get on a ship with Polish visas because it was his understanding that it was harder to come to the United States from Belgium on a Polish visa than on a German visa. So, he didn't understand how we were able to get here. I don't know the details of that but I think it is discussed in my brother's diary.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. So you arrive in the United States at age five and where did you go in the United States? Did you start in New York, what. . . .?

Ms. Fuentes: We came to the Bronx. Let me say that we did not come to Ellis Island because Ellis Island stopped being the place where you came in 1924; they changed it so that you filled out the papers wherever you were coming from, not in Ellis Island. I think Ellis Island was basically closed for immigration in 1924, and also even earlier than that. Only people who came in third class went to Ellis Island, and we came in either first or second, I don't know which.

So, we didn't come to Ellis Island; we came right into New York. My father always spoke about the fact that there is an organization called HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. And I deal with them to this day. And he always said that they helped us to get settled. I don't know exactly what they did, but they helped us to get settled. My father didn't need money from them. He had been sending money out of Germany for some time. So, we had money in the United States. So, we didn't need money from HIAS, but he always said that they helped us get settled, so maybe they helped us find an apartment. So, we moved into an apartment in the Bronx, 500 Southern Boulevard was the address, and I learned to speak English there. My brother was the only one in the family that knew English. He had studied English. My parents didn't know any English and, of course, I didn't know any English. When we lived in Antwerp, I went to kindergarten there.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: And my brother said I learned to speak Flemish. But I still didn't know English. So, this 500 Southern Boulevard was built around a semi-circle. In that circle, there was maybe grass or flowers, in that semi-circle. I used to stand there and play with the children. And when I heard an English word, which was all the time, I would run upstairs to my brother, and I would tell him that word, and he would tell me what it was in German. So, that's how I learned English.

So, then I was a month short of my sixth birthday. We came on May 1, 1934. So, then I started kindergarten again in the United States in the Bronx. And, at some point early on, like in the second or third grade, I was skipped. But even

though I was skipped, when I was in high school, I still graduated at the age of eighteen, and a lot of my classmates graduated at seventeen. I think that was because I went to kindergarten twice, even though I was skipped. So, I can't figure all that out.

Ms. Alpert: Right. Right. Okay. So did you stay living in the Bronx, or did you. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: No.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: And the reason was as follows: As soon as we got to the Bronx, or shortly after we got to the Bronx, my father returned to the business that he knew, which was the men's clothing business. And he opened up a store in Manhattan with a partner. He wasn't happy with the pace of life in New York City. In Berlin, he used to close the store, come home for lunch, and then go back to the store and work until evening. And he just didn't like it. And I think—I don't remember one-hundred percent—that the partner had also—they had some debts. My father, basically, he wasn't happy about the pace of life.

So, meanwhile we went for a summer vacation—at that time, it was the custom for Jews in New York to go to the Catskill Mountains of New York during the summer because the summers in New York were hot and in the mountains it was cooler. And this was before air conditioning. We went to the Catskill Mountains. I don't know for how long, maybe a week or two. We came back, and my father was not like American men are today—that if there's a family decision to be made, the husband and wife sit down and discuss it. This was not his way, and it was probably not the European way. But, anyway, we

come back from the Catskills, and my father announces to my mother that we are moving to the Catskills. So, my mother was aghast. All their lives, wherever they lived—when I knew them—wherever we were living, my father wanted to live elsewhere. And wherever we were living, my mother wanted to stay where we were. And it was not unusual for my father—let's say we were coming to visit you in your home—my father would come home and would say to my mother, "Why don't we buy an apartment in Liz's place and move from here?" So, that was his way. When he announced that we were moving to the Catskills, my mother said, "No way." She was not going to live in some small town in the mountains. She is living in the Bronx in the City and this was out of the question.

So, my father didn't say anything because he wasn't much for discussion. He just turned around and walked out of the house. My brother said to my mother, "I don't like the look in his eye; I am going to follow him." My brother followed him and my father went to the Harlem River and walked in. He was going to kill himself because my mother wasn't going to go with him to the Catskills. And my brother saw that. So, he called bystanders to call the police. And he went in after my father. And the police came, and they pulled my father out of the water. And, by that time, his eyes were rolling around in his head. He didn't really know what he was doing. So, the police wanted to take my father off to a hospital—I don't really know what. But my brother said, "No," he'll take him. So, my brother brought my father home, soaking wet, told my mother what happened, and she said, "All right, we'll move to the Catskills." So, that's how we moved to the Catskills.



Ms. Alpert: So, he had a way of getting his way, it sounds like.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, he did, but he didn't usually have to go to such an extreme.

Ms. Alpert: To that extreme. . .

Ms. Fuentes: But that's what he did that time.

Ms. Alpert: All right. So tell me about then your life in the Catskills and where you went from there.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, so we came first to a little village called Woodridge, New York. The Catskills are about ninety miles out of New York City. And in this little village my father rented for five years a large building called—in Yiddish, it's called a *kokhaleyn*, which means “cook for yourself,” as opposed to if you go to a hotel where the hotel cooks for you. And in a *kokhaleyn*, also called a “rooming house” in English, you cook for yourself. And the setup in this rooming house was that there was a communal kitchen on the ground floor with separate little places for each family. There would be, for each family, an icebox (in those days, there were no refrigerators; there were iceboxes) and a man used to deliver ice every day. You'd get a big chunk of ice for a quarter. So, every woman would have an icebox, a table, a little hotplate—not a hotplate—but like a little stove or whatever she had to make meals for her family. A family would rent a room in this house. My father rented it for five years, and for five years he ran it. A family would have a room in this house for the husband and wife and children, and they would make their meals downstairs in this communal kitchen. And they would rent for the season, and the season would start on May 30<sup>th</sup>, Decoration Day. It used to be on my birthday; now, it's on the weekends. It's different; it used to be on my

birthday. And the season would end on Labor Day. And people would rent from us for the season. And the husbands would stay in New York City working all week, but they would come out for the weekend and be with their wives and families.

So, that's how I started what later became a legal career because my mother learned English and could read and write English, but my father never did.

Plus, their English wasn't as good as mine because I was going to school here.

So, I would draw up the contracts from the time I was a child for the people to rent these rooms for the summertime. And that was the beginning of my doing that kind of work.

Ms. Alpert: How old were you when you moved to. . . ?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, we came to America in 1934. In 1936, we moved to Woodridge. We were in New York about a year-and-a-half. . . .

Ms. Alpert: So, maybe, you were like seven.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, it would have been seven or eight, yes, somewhere along that line I started to do the paperwork for my parents.

Ms. Alpert: So, at seven or eight you are drawing up contracts for. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Well, that sounds young. Maybe I was ten, you know, but I was certainly doing that.

Ms. Alpert: Yeah, but still. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: But I was certainly doing that. And I was certainly doing that later on when we moved to Monticello, and I'll come to that. So I was doing the paperwork and stuff because of my facility with English, which my parents didn't have.

Ms. Alpert: Did you have any other role that you had to do at this rooming house?

Ms. Fuentes: No. No. I was a child going to school. I remember going to the third grade in Woodridge because I was the teacher's pet in the third grade. And I liked it very much because I used to sit with the teacher when she graded papers, and it was a very nice feeling.

And my mother once went to the school and gave a speech about being an immigrant, and that kind of thing. That's all I remember. Well, also it was in Woodridge where I started to be very ill. I had asthma. And I couldn't sleep at night. I couldn't catch my breath at night. And my mother used to call this doctor in Woodridge. Coincidentally, he was a German Jew; his name was Fernhoff. His daughter later became—Rosina Fernhoff. She later became a famous actress in Israel. And he came, and he couldn't really help me. And I was in bad shape because I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't sleep at night. So, this Dr. Fernhoff said to my parents that maybe they should take me to Florida for the winter, that maybe I would do better in that climate. So, this is still while we were in Woodridge for the winters. Besides, the resort business was only in the summertime anyway. So, my parents started to take me—and started to go to Miami Beach for the winters. And somehow my mother had the idea to take me to an allergist, which this Dr. Fernhauf never thought about. And maybe he wasn't sufficiently educated for that, I don't know. But she took me to an allergist, and he found out that I was allergic to just about everything: chickens, dust, milk—I remember.

And my mother was just fantastic about it. She took me off all those things that I was allergic to. Oh, I remember we had to get special pillows for me to sleep on; the down pillows—I was allergic to. And we did all those things and then on her own, little-by-little, after a year, she put me back on those things, and I never had a problem again. But that is how we started to come to

Ms. Alpert: So, when you were in Florida for the winters, then that is where you went to school then, in Florida?

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. Except for one winter. So, we started coming to Miami Beach every winter. And, one winter, I was going to school and I had a cold; I was sick. So, my mother decided that going to school was too much for me. So, she went to the school and told them I wouldn't be coming anymore. And it always amazed me when I tell this story that nobody in the school said, "You can't pull a kid out of public school because she has a cold." And they all said, "Fine. Nice to meet you," and "Good luck!" and everything. So, I didn't go to school for some period of time. I don't know how long it was—a month, two, perhaps. There was a period of time when I did not go to school. Then, I returned and finished with my class. By that time, we were in Monticello, I think; and I finished with my class in Monticello.

Ms. Alpert: O.K. And Monticello is where? Was that in the Catskills?

Ms. Fuentes: It's also in the Catskills. Monticello was, I don't know, maybe twelve miles away from Woodridge. I think it was the county seat for Sullivan County. It was a much larger town.

And my father had the idea—he went to Monticello and he bought fifty acres of land. There were these two brothers named Gusar, and they ran a pharmacy in Monticello. And they owned this property; it was on the Port Jervis Road. It was Route 42 between Monticello and Port Jervis, another town in New York. And my father bought fifty acres of land from them. And built on it a bungalow colony called the Pine Tree Bungalow Colony. And he had about twenty-five bungalows and a swimming pool and a handball court and a

special house for us. After the five years were over in Woodridge, we moved to Monticello to this home that my father built there. And I started to go to school in Monticello. That would have been in—we came to Woodridge in 1936, we were there five years—1941.

Ms. Alpert: How did you adapt to it? Sounds like you moved around a lot to different schools and had to make new friends. How was that for you?

Ms. Fuentes: Good question. I always felt like an outsider. I wasn't born in this country. My parents were European; they couldn't guide me. They couldn't give me any guidance because what did they know about what I was experiencing? The other girls grew up. They knew each other; they grew up together; they knew each other. So, I always felt like an outsider.

Ms. Alpert: Did your brother, Hermann, help you with any of that or because of the large gap in age he maybe couldn't be very helpful in terms of making you feel like you belonged a little more?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, we didn't have that kind of relationship. He was always trying to be like a father to me, rather than a brother. He was fourteen years older, and he wasn't around because we came to the United States, so he was still about nineteen. But when he was twenty-four, he got married and he moved to Long Beach, Long Island and went into business. So, he really wasn't around that much. So, my parents took very good care of me but as far as—I didn't really fit in with the other kids in the school.

Ms. Alpert: And what kind of student were you? Since you were the teacher's pet in third grade, it sounds like you were probably a really good student.

Ms. Fuentes: I was always a good student because I didn't have anything else in my life either. I had no social skills. I had nowhere to learn social skills, so I don't think I looked particularly well. I don't think I knew what to do with my hair. I didn't have the clothes but I really glommed onto education. So, I graduated first in my high school class. I graduated Phi Beta Kappa at Cornell and also first in law school. So I was always a good student, and I always loved going to school. I liked my teachers, that kind of thing.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And so high school was where? Was that in Monticello?

Ms. Fuentes: Monticello.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And so you graduated from Monticello High School.

Ms. Fuentes: Right.

Ms. Alpert: All right. And. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Let me tell you something nice about that, which I don't know whether it will happen. Monticello High School just formed a Hall of Distinction for outstanding teachers and students. And somebody who worked there (she just left) nominated me for that Hall of Distinction. Whether that will happen, I don't know. But, it was very nice.

Ms. Alpert: It is nice. That is nice. So you finish up high school. . .

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah.

Ms. Alpert: and what are your plans?

Ms. Fuentes: O.K. Well, I'll go back a little bit in high school. When I went to high school, you had to make a choice at the beginning of high school whether you wanted a College Entrance program or Introduction to Business. This was not a big choice for me. I went into Introduction to Business. I had never seen a college

in my life. It never occurred to me to go to college. To me, college was, we used to see these movies—Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland where they used to be at college singing songs—and that was my view of college. I didn't plan to go. I planned to be a secretary, and I took typing in high school. I liked typing, and I was going to be a secretary.

One day I was in the ladies' room and a classmate of mine named Joan Rhulen—and I am in touch with her to this day. She became—already her family was prominent, her father was in the insurance business. (She is even more prominent today, and wealthy.) So, she was in the ladies' room with me one time and she said, "Do you plan to go to college?"

And I said, "No." Also, because I was older than some of my classmates, I said to her I couldn't go to college because I would be twenty-two when I graduated and that's too old. She said, "Well, I plan to go to college, and this and that." So, it made me start to think, you know, she had all these definite plans about what she was going to do. I had zilch. P.S. She went to college a year-and-a-half, came back to Monticello, married a classmate of ours and never left town. But that is what she told me she was going to do.

So, then the following thing happened. A guy in my class was named Jake Nemerson. His father was an optometrist. I don't why he came to me one day; I was not particularly friendly with him. I knew him like I knew everybody in my class. He came to me one day. He said he was going to the next town, Middletown, a bigger town, and he was going to take an exam there for something called the George LeFevre Scholarship. And it cost seven dollars to take the exam, but if you won the scholarship, you got four-hundred dollars.

And he asked me if I wanted to go with him. I said, "I don't know; I'll ask my father." So I went to my father and I told him what I just told you, but he misunderstood it. He thought you pay seven dollars and you get back four-hundred dollars. So, he said to me "Certainly. Go."

So, I went with this Jake Nemerson, and I took that exam. And I won the scholarship. So I came and told my father. I was all excited about it. He didn't know what the excitement was about because that's how he understood it in the first place. So, it wasn't a big deal for him. After I took that exam, because Jake had invited me, I took another exam, the New York State Scholarship. And, I won that one, too.

So then I forgot to say. . . so I took this Introduction to Business course. And I was in it a short time when the teacher—her name was Margaret Gallagher, and she was very nice. She knew me because she used to drive to school and be on my road, and she would pick me up and give me a ride to school. She was very nice. So, she came to me. I was in that Introduction to Business course a short time, and she said, "Sonia, you have to go leave this course and go into College Entrance." I liked the Introduction to Business course. I liked the courses; I had friends in the program. I said, "I don't want to do that; I am happy in this course."

She said, "You don't belong in this course. You need to go into College Entrance."

I said, "I don't have any intention to go to college." She said, "You have to go to College Entrance." So, I switched.

Ms. Alpert: So, were your parents supportive of you going to college?



Ms. Fuentes: Absolutely not. No.

Ms. Alpert: What was your father's idea?

Ms. Fuentes: My father's and mother's idea was that a girl gets married when she is eighteen and she has a husband and she raises children. And she has to know how to cook and sew. And they knew that I wasn't too interested or skilled in cooking but, nonetheless, this was their—this is what they knew. They came from a village in Poland. Jewish people—this is what they knew girls did.

And I—well, I have to go back and tell you that from the age of ten I had this feeling—I've subsequently learned that Holocaust survivors have such feelings. But I didn't know it. I knew that my life was saved from the Holocaust. My life was also saved because my mother had had seven abortions before I was born. She said the reason, she told me, was that it wasn't fashionable for well-to-do people in Germany or Berlin to have a lot of children. So, she had these seven abortions. And the year before she got pregnant with me, she had an ectopic pregnancy, and it took her a year to recover, and she said she was very sick. She said she used to walk in the house and the maid would be walking behind her giving her a little tea, a teaspoon of tea, or something. She was very ill. She was never supposed to get pregnant again.

She also had two abortionists: a Jewish one and a German one, and she liked the German one better. So, when she became pregnant with me, she went to the German one. He was having an affair with a Swiss ballerina, and he was away with her for the weekend. So, she came home and went to bed. And my father came home that night and he saw her in bed and he said, "Ah, Lena, you

had it done.” And she said, “No, I couldn’t have it done. Dr. so-and-so was away in the Swiss Alps. I’ll go to Dr. so-and-so Monday.” And my father said, “Ah, let it be already.” And that’s why I was born.

So, because I was bright, and because my life was saved from the Holocaust, and because my life was saved because I wasn’t aborted, I had this idea that there was a purpose to my life, and that there was something I was supposed to do, and that I couldn’t just get married and raise a family like other women did—that that wasn’t an option for me. I never mentioned this to anybody because they would have thought I was wacko. But I always had that feeling. So after I got those scholarships, I applied to colleges. And people said you don’t have to apply to a lot. And maybe that was true in those days and maybe it wasn’t. They said two is fine.

So, I applied to Cornell, and I applied to a small college called Hartwick in Oneonta, New York.

Ms. Alpert: Any particular reason you chose those two?

Ms. Fuentes: I don’t remember.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: I don’t remember. So, Hartwick accepted me, and I wrote back and accepted their offer to go there. And, then, Cornell accepted me. And I think Cornell accepted me because I had these two scholarships. I think Cornell was basically taking people with scholarships. So, then I told Hartwick I had been accepted at Cornell, and I wouldn’t go to Hartwick. And I decided to go to Cornell.

Ms. Alpert: All right. So, now you have been accepted to Cornell, Sonia, and so off to

college; what happened next?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, my father drove me up to college, to Cornell. My father and mother drove me up to Cornell, and then they went back to Monticello.

The first three months there I was really unhappy. I saw all these college kids going around campus, they seemed to have so much savoir faire. I had never really been away from home before. I really felt like a fish out of water. I was a small town girl and I wanted to go home. But I couldn't go home because my parents had gone to Miami Beach for the winter, as usual, so they weren't in Monticello. And I also didn't want the whole community to know that I hadn't made it. So, I stayed at Cornell.

And after the first three months, I was fine. I was not a participant in extracurricular affairs; and if I were the person then that I am today, I would have been. But I had a coterie of friends, and I hung out with them and I was happy there.

Ms. Alpert: Were there a lot of women there at the time?

Ms. Fuentes: I think there were plenty of women there at the time. This is 1946 to 1950—  
Yeah, there were plenty of women there.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And that was the period of time, or one of the periods of time, where when women went to college they were looking for what was called an MRS degree. Basically, they were there to meet an eligible male to marry. Did you get a sense of that from some of the other women—that that was their goal?

Ms. Fuentes: No. I don't know how true that was. I did not get that feeling at Cornell. There were plenty of women that met people there, but I never had the feeling that people were there to get married, and I don't know how true that statement

is about women going to college—how true that was.

I had a problem because I didn't know what to major in. I have always loved languages because of the fact that when I was born, I was speaking German. German was my first language. My parents spoke Yiddish; I knew Yiddish. In Antwerp, Flemish; in the United States, English.

So, I had a facility for languages, and I loved languages. And I loved Latin, which I had several years of in high school and a very good Latin teacher. So, my first major was—I was going to major in languages. And I took some more Latin, and I think I took French. And my idea was to be a translator at the United Nations.

So, then, after about a year of that, I said to myself, "What kind of a career is that—just to translate what somebody else says. That is not very intellectually demanding."

I don't want to cast aspersions on translators. I think it is demanding now, but that's how I thought then. So, then I switched into Psychology, which has always interested me. And I became a Psych major. And then somebody said to me, "Do you know that if you want to do anything in Psychology, you need to get a Master's or a Ph.D.?"

And I said, "No, I didn't know that." And, so, nobody in my family had even gone to college; it never occurred to me that I would go on beyond college.

So, I said, "Well, that's out." So I have to switch from Psychology to something else because I certainly don't plan to go to graduate school.

So, then, I was so floundering around trying to find out what to major in. At one point, I was thinking of taking meat cutting in the Home Ec. School. And,

somewhere along the line, I found out that Cornell had—at that time it was called the Graduate School of Business and Public Administration. It is now called the Samuel Johnson School. And I learned that you could do your senior year of college by going to the Graduate School of Business and Public Administration. So I opted to do that. Instead of taking undergraduate classes, I did the first of the two-year school—if I had stayed for the two years, which never occurred to me—if I had stayed for two years, I would have had a Master's in Business Administration. So, I went the first year as my senior year at Cornell undergraduate. And I was first and second in my class, the two semesters that I went to that school. And then I graduated.

Ms. Alpert: So, when you did that, what was the goal? Why did you want to do your senior year with Public Administration and Business?

Ms. Fuentes: Okay. By the way, I am afraid that we are taping over—no? We are sure you are not. . . okay.

My father was a businessman. And I liked business. And one summer, I was going to work in a department store in Monticello, but I didn't last very long there. I forget what happened. It was very funny because that department store was called Hammond & Cooke, and it was a major department store. If you went to work there—you had to have—all the sales clerks wore the same outfit on Monday, and another outfit on Tuesday, and another outfit on Wednesday. So, there were like five outfits.

So, my mother took all those outfits and sewed them and fixed them to fit me. And, then, I think I lasted there a few days. And I don't know why I left: whether I couldn't stand on my feet or what happened, but I didn't work there

more than a few days. But I was always interested in retail. And my idea in getting out of Cornell was—I made a connection—there was a department store in New York called McCreery’s. Not a big department store. And I got into their—they had some kind of fashion training program—and I was accepted into their training program. So, my idea was to be in retail and, as soon as I got out of college, I went to work for McCreery’s, and I lasted there three days because I couldn’t stand—oh, in order to be a fashion whatever, the training program commenced with your working as a retail clerk. And, so, I was working as a retail clerk. I liked the work, I liked the selling, but I couldn’t stand on my feet eight hours a day. So, I lasted there three days.

Ms. Alpert: So, what did you do from there?

Ms. Fuentes: So, then was a very difficult period because somebody said to me, “Send out two-hundred resumes to companies all over the United States, looking for a job.” And I did that and didn’t get a single answer. So then—oh I know what—so then, throughout this time, my parents were saying to me, “Study shorthand” because I already had typing in high school.

Ms. Alpert: So, they still wanted you to be a secretary. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Well, but also because I couldn’t find a job.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: So I pooh-poohed this “Study shorthand” because I was a college graduate.

But seven months passed, and I wasn’t getting a job.

So, I went to the Browne Business School in Hempstead, New York. I already had the typing, so I studied shorthand. And, I broke all records there because I came out after two-and-a-half months with a terrific shorthand speed—because

my mother had helped me. I used to go to school in the morning, and then I would come home and my mother would sit with me in the afternoon dictating to me, and I would write it in shorthand. So, after two-and-a-half months I had the speed.

And I got out of school on Friday. On Monday, I had a job. As a secretary.

Ms. Alpert: Kind of ironic.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, that's the way it. . .right.

So, then I had various secretarial jobs. Not that many, but I had several. And, some of them I stayed at for awhile; some of them I didn't. The place that I was at the longest was Fawcett Publications. They put out these women's magazines, like *Today's Woman* was one of their magazines. *True Confessions* was one of their magazines. And I was working as a secretary for the fashion advertising manager. But I would leave every winter to go with my parents to Miami Beach. And my bosses—at one point I had two bosses—but my main boss was named Sonny Sunshine. S.T. Sunshine was his name. And I would go away for the winter and would come back, and he would take me back. Shortly before I left, I wanted to get into editorial work, not just to be a secretary. So, I got a job with *True Confessions* where I was going to be at the lowest rung of the editorial staff where they had what's called a slush pile. Unsolicited manuscripts come in, and those were called the slush pile. And I would be going through the slush pile to see if there was anything worthwhile there.

By this time, about four years had passed from the time I had graduated from college. And when people asked me, "What do you do?" I said I was a

secretary, and I always said it a little shame-facedly. But the people didn't take it that way. Being a secretary was a perfectly respectable job for a woman in those days. When I said, "Secretary," and I said it shame-facedly, but the people accepted it; that was just fine. But I didn't feel it was fine. I was out of college now four years, not working steadily, but four years out, and I saw that I was getting no place fast.

Ms. Alpert: Did you feel like at that point the effects of discrimination against women. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: No. Not aware of it.

Ms. Alpert: It did not occur to you?

Ms. Fuentes: No. We didn't think of those things. It wasn't a recognizable thing at that time. You just accepted the world the way it was. Not just me, most women. That never occurred to me.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: It didn't occur to me that I got out of college and couldn't get a job, that this was sex discrimination. No.

And then a few things happened. One time when we were down in Miami Beach, I was driving in the car and I passed the University of Miami in Coral Gables. And, all my life I have loved college campuses. And when I see a college, I would like to go there. So, I am driving by the University of Miami, and I said to myself, "Oh, I would like to go there," And, then, I said to myself, "You can't go there." I already went to college. But then I said, "But I could go to law school."

So, I took the law aptitude test, and I came out in the ninety-eighth, ninety-ninth percentile. But I didn't know if I wanted to go to Miami Law School or



to another law school. And, then, I was working for an outfit called—I don't know why I wasn't at Fawcett Publications any more—but I was working for Cohn-Hall-Marx. And my boss was a man named L. S. Sollfrey.

Ms. Alpert: And what kind of business was Cohn-Hall-Marx?

Ms. Fuentes: Garment, fabrics, garments, that kind of thing, materials. A very well known big company.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: So, my boss was a very unfriendly type. Very unfriendly. He would never say, "Hello," or anything like that. And then I worked—Oh, and before I worked for him, they had put me, as I recall, in some temporary jobs until I came to work for him. And, as I said, he was a very unfriendly guy. And I was working for him as a secretary, and then I got called into the Personnel Office one day, and I was told that Sollfrey doesn't want me to work for him anymore *because I am not friendly*, and that they would transfer me to another temporary job. And I said, "Oh, no." I said, "I took this as a permanent job, and I am not taking a temporary job, and I am going to leave if I can't stay working for him. And I quit. So after I quit I—oh, and I said to them, "I quit and I am going to law school." And they looked at me like—if a woman said she's going to be flying without a plane, you know. It just was an insane thing for a woman to say she was going to law school, especially a secretary.

So, I left there, and then I had my first legal victory. I applied for unemployment compensation. So, Cohn-Hall-Marx said I wasn't fired, I quit. They wanted to put me on another job, and I quit. And I said, "No, because I was hired for a permanent job and by wanting to put me into a temporary job,

they were in effect firing me.” And the Unemployment Compensation ruled for me. And I got about two weeks’ unemployment; I didn’t like being on unemployment and I got another job. But that’s when I made this announcement that I was going to law school.

And the final thing that happened was that Decoration Day was coming up. it was going to be my birthday, and I didn’t have any plans. So, I decided to throw a party for myself. But it was just a few days before May 30<sup>th</sup>. So, I called up different friends, including a guy I was dating, to invite them to my party. But people had already had plans—it was a holiday weekend—and nobody was able to come.

Ms. Alpert: Including your boyfriend?

Ms. Fuentes: Right.

So, I said, “I see now that I cannot depend on other people. And I better make a life for myself.” And by that time it was too late to apply to any other law schools, so I decided to go to the University of Miami.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And is that where you graduated from?

Ms. Fuentes: Yes.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. So tell me about your years in law school—was law school what you expected?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, people all said to me, “It doesn’t matter that you were always a good student; law school is different. And the fact that you were a good student in college and high school, whatever, law school is different.” Well, that turned out not to be true. I was the same good student in law school that I always was in all my other classes. I used to cram.

At Cornell I crammed and at law school I crammed. When an exam was coming up, I would work through, day and night, so that was one thing. But an interesting thing happened with my parents. It's a long story. My parents didn't want me to go to Cornell, as I told you, because for them a woman was supposed to get married and have children. She's not supposed to go to college. So, then, when I said I was going to law school . . . . (By the way, my parents paid for me to go to Cornell.) So, then when I said I was going to law school—they were, you know, this was like they felt it was like putting the final nail in the coffin of my spinsterhood. So, they were opposed to that. But I didn't care. I have a tough time making up my mind, but when I make up my mind, I don't care what anybody else thinks. So, and then my brother came in when he heard about it, and he spent like two hours in our house ranting and raving—we were living in Long Beach, Long Island at that time where he was living—and he was carrying on for two hours about why I shouldn't go to law school. He left, I packed my bags, and went to law school. So, I had fifteen hundred dollars.

Ms. Alpert: And was that going to be used to pay for your tuition and your living expenses?

Ms. Fuentes: I thought that would see me through the first year. After that, I had no idea what I would do.

So, I started law school, and they put me in—like an apartment—with three other women students at the school. But they weren't in law school; they were in the undergraduate school. One of those women never went to class. She came, as you asked me earlier, she came to the University of Miami only to

meet boys. And she didn't go to classes.

There were two others. One of them I learned—I shared a room with her—and one time I got up in the morning and she starts yelling at me and carrying on that I moved her hairbrush—that she had left it here and she found it there—so I must have moved her hairbrush. And she is screaming and carrying on.

So, I took to sleeping on the floor of the living room in this apartment because I didn't want to antagonize this woman, who turned out to be a nut. And, then, it was also difficult because we decided we were going to cook together, and that didn't work out. So, then, I said, "One of us should cook one week and the other one another week."

So, then I bought stuff for the refrigerator. They were jealous of my food, and this and that. The whole thing didn't work out.

So, then I wrote a letter to my parents, and I said that I was doing fine at law school, but that I was having some difficulty getting around grocery shopping and stuff because I didn't have a car. And then I went on to other things, you know.

Well, my mother read this letter to my father, and he didn't say anything. He got up and went to another room. So, she didn't know what was going on. So, she followed him, and she saw that he was packing a suitcase. So, she said, "What are you doing?"

He said, "Didn't you hear that letter you just read to me?"

She said, "Yeah, what about it?"

He says, "The girl needs a car." He says, "I have got to go down and buy her a

car.”

So, my mother says, “It’s *erev* [the eve of] Rosh Hashanah.” It was the eve of the High Holy Days.

My father says, “The girl needs a car.”

And, so, he went on the train, came to Miami Beach, and he called me. Well, I had never heard my father on the telephone. My father had a strong Jewish accent. But, on the phone, it didn’t come across.

So, I get a call and I said, “Hello, who is this?”

And the person on the other end says, “This is your father.”

And I said, “My father’s in Long Beach. Who are you?”

And he said, “This is your father.”

I said, “Is this Hal?” That is the guy I was dating in Connecticut.

He says, “No, this is your father.”

I said, “If you are my father, what’s my Jewish name?”

He says, “Sheyndl.”

I said, “Hi, Dad.”

So, he came and he bought me a car. And, then, I took him to the apartment where I was living, and he saw that I was sleeping on the living room floor.

He didn’t say anything to me.

He bought me the car, he went back up north, walks into the house with my mother, and he says, “We have to move to Florida.”

And my mother says, “Why is that?”

And he says, “Well, the girl is living down there, and she has to sleep on the

floor. We have to buy a house so she can live with us.”

So, my brother was a realtor by that time. . . . So, they gave him the house we owned in Long Beach, and within two weeks they were down and they bought a house in North Miami Beach, and I moved in with them, and was able to continue, and went to law school.

Ms. Alpert: That’s an incredible story. What year was it that you started law school?

Ms. Fuentes: 1954.

Ms. Alpert: 1954. And you were then maybe twenty-six?

Ms. Fuentes: Twenty-six.

Ms. Alpert: That’s what I was thinking.

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah.

Ms. Alpert: So, all right. And. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: I should also say that there were different factors that brought me to law.

When my parents were in the Catskills, they had a husband-and-wife legal team, Joe and Ethel Kooperman, who were in the Wayside Inn Building in Ellenville, New York. That’s another town in the Catskills. And my father invested in second mortgages, and they were the lawyers who represented my father in those second mortgages.

So, I had a role model of a woman lawyer. That was number one. Number two, I used to belong to Great Books groups and we read Thomas Aquinas, and he wrote about the natural law. And that interested me; I liked reading about it. Also, when I was in the Graduate School of Business and Public Administration, we had a professor from the Cornell Law School come, and he spoke to us in the law school. I’m sorry, in the Graduate School of Business

and Public Administration; he was a professor at the Law School. He came and taught a course called Bills and Notes. And his name was David Curtiss. You wouldn't think that Bills and Notes are so interesting, but this professor was a wonderful teacher. That got me interested in law. And I have always been good at speaking and writing. So, all of those factors were a part of my deciding to go to law school.

Ms. Alpert: Did you have a sense of what you wanted to do with a law degree?

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. I wanted to go into private practice like Joe and Ethel Kooperman were.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And as you were going through law school, did you come to any ideas about what you wanted to focus on, what kind of law?

Ms. Fuentes: No, I just wanted to go into private practice. And it was a vision in my head that I would be in private practice with my husband like Joe and Ethel Kooperman were in private practice. But nothing beyond that.

Ms. Alpert: You have an interesting story about taking the bar exam.

Ms. Fuentes: Oh, my God.

Ms. Alpert: Tell me about that bar exam.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, so then I had to take—like everybody else—I had to take the bar exam. And I always liked tests.

ORAL HISTORY OF  
SONIA PRESSMAN FUENTES  
ON BEHALF OF WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LAW  
A PROJECT OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION  
SENIOR LAWYERS DIVISION

BY LIZ ALPERT  
SECOND INTERVIEW

AUGUST 17, 2013

Ms. Alpert: This is Liz Alpert, and I am here with Sonia Pressman Fuentes, and today is August 17, 2013. And this is the second in the oral history of Ms. Fuentes. And, Sonia, let's get started today where we left off. When we talked last, you were in law school. And I want to hear more about your law school experience because you must have been one of the few women attending law school at that time.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, yes and no. I have data on this if you want to break off and start up again. But I was going to the University of Miami (Florida) Law School, and I think that eleven percent, as I remember—and this is 1954—eleven percent of my class were female.

Ms. Alpert: Really?

Ms. Fuentes: I'd have to check it to be one-hundred percent sure, but that's my recollection. And the nationwide average at that time was eight percent. So, my law school had a higher percentage than the nationwide percentage. So, there were a good many women in my class.



Ms. Alpert: I had a law school professor myself at Stetson Law, and there was a picture of her in her law school class. And I think she was maybe either the only woman or one of two women, so . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: What year was that?

Ms. Alpert: I don't know. That's a good question. But I am thinking it was about the same time you went to school. So . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Really? I did experience one, only one, incident, let's call it. It was more than an incident, but I don't know whether it was gender discrimination. What happened when I first started to go to classes at the law school, there were a group of about four fellow classmates of mine and they were led by a guy named Larry Perlmutter. And whenever they saw me, they would tease me in some way. And I can't tell you what they said, but they were after me teasing me in some way. And this went on for about six weeks. And, finally, I went up to Larry, the ringleader, and I said, "Why are you doing this to me?" And he said, "Oh, I didn't know it bothered you." And I said, "Well, of course, it bothers me." So, he said, "Well, we won't do it again." And they never did do it again. And I have never had a single problem with being a woman in law school at the University of Miami.

Ms. Alpert: And it didn't even—did you think about yourself that it was unusual for you to be there or did it just seem normal to you?

Ms. Fuentes: In law school it seemed normal to me. But when I decided to go to law school, which wasn't that much before I went to law school, and I would tell my parents and contemporaries of my parents, everybody was aghast. "That is no job for a woman" and "What made you think of such a thing?" And there's

even—I tell in my memoir that my mother and I were once in a shopping center, it was called the 163<sup>rd</sup> Street Shopping Center in North Miami Beach. All of a sudden, my mother sees a man there that she doesn't know. She takes me by the hand, goes over to that man and says, "Sir, look at this little girl. Do you think she could be a lawyer?" And the man was totally flummoxed. He didn't say anything, he just took off at his earliest opportunity. But that's the kind of reaction I had before I went to law school. But once I got into law school [snaps her fingers]. . . .

Ms. Alpert: It just seemed normal.

Ms. Fuentes: Right.

Ms. Alpert: That is unusual.

Ms. Fuentes: I don't know.

Ms. Alpert: How did you find the curriculum, studying law? Did you feel like you had an affinity for it?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, when I was thinking of going to law school, I took the Law Aptitude Test that was given at the University of Miami Law School, and I came out in the ninety-eighth or the ninety-ninth percentile. So, that was an affirmation that I was going in the right direction. I also had a role model as I was growing up in the Catskill Mountains of New York. My parents used a husband-and-wife legal team, Joe and Ethel Kooperman. And, so, I had a role model of a woman lawyer. And it was my motivation or intention in going to law school to be in private practice with my husband, like Ethel was with Joe. I never did anything like that. But that was my role model and that was the reason I was going.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And then we were just getting into, the last time we talked, your description of taking the bar exam which, as I read in your memoir, is an interesting story, or kind of humorous story.

Ms. Fuentes: Okay.

Ms. Alpert: You want to tell that?

Ms. Fuentes: Sure. I was always a good student from the first grade on. The one thing I knew how to do was to go to school, study for an exam and do well. But before I went to law school, everybody said to me “Law school is not like college. You might have done well in your earlier academic career but law school is different.” So they really put the fear of God into me about that. Nobody told me *how* it was different, but they all said it was different. So in my first year I was very worried because it’s not like other things. I don’t know how it’s different—what do I do? I have always been a crammer. At college I used to wake up at two a.m. in the morning before an exam and just cram everything I could. And when I was going to law school, I was living with my parents in North Miami Beach, and I remember we would set up my typewriter, sometimes it was outside. I don’t know how a typewriter could have been outside or inside, and I would just cram. And I did fine like I’d always done.

I graduated first in my law school class after three years. The first year was scary because of what I had been told. And after that, it was fine.

Ms. Alpert: So you were first in your class.

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah.

Ms. Alpert: Good for you!

Ms. Fuentes: Not a huge class.

Ms. Alpert: But still, you know, first is still first. Okay, so taking the bar exam.

Ms. Fuentes: Oh, I forgot to tell it. So, as I've always told you, I have never had a fear of exams because—let's say I took a course with you, Liz Alpert. So, I am in that course with you for a semester listening to your teachings. I know what you are interested in, and I know what you are stressing and focusing on, and I study that. And then you give me the exam and I do fine, okay? But when I thought of the bar exam, this was different. These questions were not being written by people I knew who were teaching me. They were written by an unknown group of people. I don't even know where they were. So, this was a whole different ball game. And when I thought about that, I got scared because I didn't know how to prepare for it. So, I called up a guy that I knew named Bob Bader, who was a practicing lawyer in Miami Beach. And I asked—no, I don't think I asked him about the bar—trying to think—I don't know whether I asked him about the—I might have asked him about taking the bar exam, I am not sure. I called him up for some kind of advice. And we had lunch, and he talked about his career and what not. I didn't get any help whatsoever.

And then I didn't know how to study for this kind of exam where they could ask anything from any field of law. How do you prepare for something like that? I did take the bar cram course. I didn't find it very helpful. I took it later on in Washington, D.C., by a famous guy who gave that law course called Joe Nекреlli—he really did it. We knew what was coming up. But the Florida one didn't do that for me. So, I took the cram course; it didn't take away my concern.

So, then I had—my mother had fixed up a den for me in our home, which was my office where I studied. And the walls were full of certificates I had gotten and honors I had gotten and all this stuff. I tried to study in there and all those honors and things scared the hell out of me, so that didn't work. So, then, I had a law school professor—I forget what his first name was, his last name was Thompson—he was called Tommy Thompson—and he taught Torts. And I liked him very much. And I don't know how it came up but he was in law practice with a judge—I think his name was Samuels—in Hollywood, Florida. And he said if I wanted to study for the bar, I could study in their offices, and they had all the law books and everything like that. So, I took him up on that. And when I lived in North Miami Beach, I drove to Hollywood, which was not a long trip, maybe twenty minutes, something like that. And in a week I was studying in his office and I was doing it by reading legal cases. But at the rate I was going, maybe in ten years I would have read all the legal cases. So, this was not working. So, after a week I said, "That's not working."

So, then, I thought I'd study with somebody else. And a very bright guy in my class was named Steven Lacheen. And I asked him if he wanted to study with me. He said, "Yeah." He came over one day, and we studied a whole day, and then my mother came in and said, "It's time for dinner." I thought, naturally, they would invite Steve. But my parents were European people from a small village in Poland; they didn't know from entertaining and inviting people like we do in the United States. So, they invited me to dinner, and they didn't say anything to Steve. So, he got up and went home. I never saw him again with regard to studying. And I said to my father, "Why didn't you invite Steve?" He

said, "This is not a hotel." So, that was the end of studying with Steve. And the other thing that happened was I would wake up in the morning and I couldn't eat. I was so upset that I couldn't eat and didn't eat. I didn't have breakfast; I didn't have lunch. And my parents used to go to the beach after lunch, and they invited me, and I would go to the beach with them. I'd put on a bathing suit, go to the beach with them, and it was fine.

And, then, I would vow the next morning, "I am going to get started." And the next morning was the same thing. I got up, couldn't eat, and didn't feel like doing anything, and then I went to the beach.

At one point, my mother said since I am sick, she will take me to the doctor. So, she took me to the doctor, and he examined me, and he said he can't find anything wrong with me, and that when he had to take exams for medical school, he also had some difficulties. And he said, "Only the good students go through this. The bad students never worry about it." And he said, "Go home, you're fine." So, that didn't help.

So, then I thought maybe I needed psychiatric care. So, I looked in the phone book, and I called a psychiatrist. And I said I was having this problem and would like to come in for some help and what was the cost? And he said it was fifteen dollars an hour. Now, you can't imagine today what that was like. I can't tell you myself, but at that time fifteen dollars an hour would be like a thousand dollars an hour. I mean, it was way out of my realm. And I said, "I am not that sick." And that was the end of that.

So, then this guy Max Danton called. He had been—he was an older man. I mean older than we students were. When I went to law school, I was twenty-six,

so I was older, but he could have been forty, I don't know. He didn't finish the first year. I don't remember why, but he didn't finish. But we remained in touch off-and-on. So, he called me and asked me how I was doing. And I told him I was having all these difficulties studying for the bar, and he said, "Sonia, you better not take that bar." He said, "You'll go in there and you will faint and you will have to be carried out of there." He said, "Wait and take it sometime in the future when you are not so upset."

I said "Max, that is a terrific idea." I never thought of that—I wouldn't take it. I'll take it next time.

So, I put on a kimono that I had, and I lay down on the couch, relaxing. And my mother saw me and I said, "Mom, I am not taking the bar." So, she could have cared less. She said, "No big deal."

My father comes home in the evening and I said, "Dad, Max just called and he suggested I not take the bar because I'll have a nervous breakdown when I go there. So, I am not taking the bar."

He says, "Max? Who is he? Where was he when I was paying for your college and your law school and your medical appointments and your bar exams and your car? I was paying for all that." He said, "And I paid for everything and now you are going to take the bar." He said, "If worse comes to worse, you will see what the questions look like. So, if you flunk it, you'll have an idea for the next time."

So, that made sense to me. So, I put away all my books and all my papers and everything because by this time it was like a week or two before the exam and I figured that's it already. I put away every—packed up everything and I enjoyed

myself for a couple of weeks. But I still wasn't eating a lot. But I was going to go. My father said I had to go, and I was going to go.

So, we get to the airport—and there is a woman in my class that I was not particularly friendly with in the past. She was an older woman—maybe she was in her forties—older than we were. And she was married to a dentist, and she was well-to-do, and she was a classmate. But I was not close to her. I see her, however, and my mother goes over to her, and I introduce her “It's Fay Becker.” And my mother says, “My daughter has been sick. She hasn't been eating. So, I would like you to take care of her on this plane flight and during the three-day law exam. . . .

Ms. Alpert: Where were you flying to? From?

Ms. Fuentes: From Miami Beach to Jacksonville.

Ms. Alpert: Jacksonville. Okay. That's where they were giving the exam?

Ms. Fuentes: Right. The exam. My mother walks up to this woman she doesn't know and asks her to take care of me for three days and to cut my food, my meat, because I wasn't able to eat the regular way. But if she cut it into small pieces for me, I could eat it.

Ms. Alpert: Were you mortified?

Ms. Fuentes: Mortified. But Fay said, “Fine.” She'll do it. So, Fay and I flew to Jacksonville, and we had the most wonderful time. We didn't crack a book the whole three days. We went to see *Love in the Afternoon* with Gary Cooper and Audrey Hepburn, which I loved. And we just bumbled around. And I found the exam easy. I left early at every session. I finished the exam and left. And so the three days passed, no problem. We get back on the plane, and I said,



“Oh, my God, Fay, what we did!” We could have used these three days to study and catch up and we didn’t. She didn’t say anything. And then across the aisle from us there were these three guys who were friends in law school, and they were together, and they are whooping it up in the plane and everything—how well they did. And I am sitting there, you know, shrinking into myself because I passed up the last chance I had.

So, I deplaned and my mother and father are standing there quietly waiting for me at the Miami Airport. And also in another place were standing the wives and the children of these three men. And they greet them with these big hooplas and carrying on and everything. And I am quietly going to my parents, and I said to my parents, “You see those guys? How happy they are? I don’t know what I did.”

My father says, “Don’t worry. You passed it and they didn’t.” And that is what happened.

Ms. Alpert: Very, very wise father.

Ms. Fuentes: So, that is what happened with the bar.

Ms. Alpert: All right. So, now do you get a job?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, my aim had been, as I mentioned earlier, to go into private practice with my husband. Only two things were wrong with that: I didn’t have a husband and I didn’t have the private practice. So, the first summer after my freshman year of law school, I clerked for these people that I said were my heroes, Joe and Ethel Kooperman in the Catskill Mountains in New York. Actually, I was more of a secretary for them. And then my second year, I worked for a firm called Kovner & Mannheimer on Miami Beach. And I made ten dollars a

week. And, for that, I had to be dressed, had to have a law school education, have a car to drive to their office in Miami Beach, and work for them—and got ten dollars a week. The last week that I was to work for them, I was only going to work three days instead of five because it was Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur. And I was taking off. Kovner, one of the two bosses—who came from an illustrious Jewish family that I read about in books he had there—called me into his office and said that since I would only be working three days the last week instead of five, it didn't make a lot of sense to pay me ten dollars for only three days' work. So, he suggested that I quit the week before and not get ten dollars for only three days' work.

And other things I saw in the practice there left me less than enthused about private practice. The other thing I remember was that Mannheimer was a nice guy. And one time he asked me to accompany him—he was going to argue a motion before the judge—and as we were leaving the office, he sees a pile of books there. He says, "Take those books."

I said, "What for?" He said, "The judge will think that we have been studying those books for this case." Well, that didn't sit very well with me. I didn't like that kind of maneuver. So, at the end of that summer—here I am entering my senior year and what I had seen of private practice was not uplifting to me. So, I didn't know what I was going to do.

There was an acting dean of the Law School, a woman named Minnette Massey, who was also a professor—I forget what she taught. I never took a course with her. She was the law librarian also. And I never had a course with her; I knew her, but just as I knew a lot of people. And I get a call from her

one afternoon. And she says, “Sonia, did you see a notice up on the bulletin board that recruiters are coming down from the United States Labor Department to recruit attorneys?” I said, “I did see that, Minnette. But I have no interest in it because my parents used to drive to Miami Beach every year for the winter, and I used to go with them. And we’d drive through Washington and I saw it as this city with so many grey high-rise buildings. I envisioned that nameless, anonymous government employees were working in those buildings, and I didn’t want to be one of them.” So I said, “Yes, Minnette, I saw that notice but I have no interest in going to Washington, D.C.”

She said, “Well, I thought you should go for the interview, and I made an appointment for you for Friday at two o’clock.” I didn’t feel like I could say to her, “You made the appointment, but I am not going.” So, I said, “All right. I’ll go.”

So, I went to the interview. It was for the Justice Department—any of the agencies within the Department of Justice. No, I’m sorry. It was with the United States Labor Department.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: And I don’t remember who interviewed me, but, subsequently I got a letter from a woman named Bessie Margolin—who was a top person in the Labor Department, who later became a friend of mine and a founder of NOW—offering me a job in the Labor Department. So, since I had no other possibilities, I accepted.

Then, I saw a notice on the bulletin board that recruiters were coming from the

U.S. Justice Department to interview for something called the Program for Honor Law Graduates. So, since I had already gone to the first one with the Labor Department, I went to the second one with the Justice Department. And, then, they offered me a job. So, I figured Honor Law Graduates—this has got to be something elite. So, I wrote to Bessie Margolin and I said, “Justice Department people were here and they offered me a job and I am going to take that one rather than the one with you.” And she was very nice about it and said, “That’s just fine.” So, that’s how I came to Washington.

Ms. Alpert: And how did you find Washington when you first came?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, first of all, it was a fortunate thing I learned that there was a place called the Meridian Hill Hotel for Women, which was on 16<sup>th</sup> Street in a convenient neighborhood. I don’t remember what I paid—it could have been eighty dollars a week—and, so, I was able to move in there, and I didn’t have to worry about furniture and looking for housing, and everything. This was very reasonable and they provided meals.

So, I kept—all my things were in the trunk of my car—my clothes . . . . Like in the summertime, I would keep the winter clothes in the trunk of my car; in the winter, I’d keep the summer clothes there because it was just a room. And two people that I worked with—I chose to go with the Office of Alien Property in the Department of Justice—and two women lawyers who later became very longtime friends also were living at the Meridian Hill Hotel for Women. By the way, it is now a dorm for Howard University. And, so, I lived there about a year, a year-and-a half.

I was very thrilled to be in the nation’s capital. Very thrilled to be where the

Congress was and the capital was and the President. And, so, that's what I remember of my feelings.

Ms. Alpert: So, it wasn't like your original impression of being in Washington as being this . . .

Ms. Fuentes: No. Correct.

Ms. Alpert: this kind of anonymous bureaucrat. That you realized you were doing things that had some kind of a meaning or did you feel that yet?

Ms. Fuentes: I didn't feel the meaning yet. But I took a job with this Office of Alien Property. And I shared a very huge office with two other men: a guy named Wendell Colson, who was the father of the famous Chuck Colson—later, who was sent to jail for Watergate and then became a born-again evangelical leader. His father was Wendell Colson. And he was a character. The other guy in the office was a guy named Joe Jaskiewicz. And he was a very bright lawyer. Quiet guy, a wonderful man and taught me a lot.

So, I worked in the office with the two of them and the Office of Alien Property—they asked what agency of the Justice Department you wanted to go to. So, I opted for this Office of Alien Property because it handled claims under the Trading with the Enemy Act. I had never heard of this act before. I think there were a series of acts. But during every war, the United States seized the property of enemy aliens that it could seize within its jurisdiction. And the last time it did that this time was World War II. And then the law provides that certain people can get their property back if they filed claims. And those people were Jews who were in Germany or something like that and whose property was taken. Or else, the big case was the *IG Farben* case,

where this corporation said you took this property but it didn't belong to me; it actually belonged to somebody else. There was a dispute about ownership, and there were other reasons why people would file claims and say, "I want my property back." And then I and the other attorneys would handle those claims. So, it was interesting to me because I came from Germany, and lived in Belgium, and I was an immigrant—so, that's why I opted for that kind of law.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. All right. And, again, did you feel at any point that it was unusual that you were in this kind of position or that there was any kind of sexual discrimination—treated any differently because you were a woman, do you think?

Ms. Fuentes: Okay. Until the Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became law and until NOW was founded, I and ninety percent of the other people in this country never gave it a thought. There wasn't such a thing as sex discrimination. Now, I know there was a first wave with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They had fought for suffrage and everything.

Then, there were other movements, but I don't think most people were aware of it. I certainly wasn't aware of it. I always give the example that supposing I had a dog come in here now. It belonged to me. You would not be shocked that that dog wasn't wearing clothes because none of the dogs you knew wore clothes. And, in fact, if I had a dog with a pink cap and a tutu, and I don't know what, you would have said to me, "This woman is a little bit off."

Similarly with women's rights. You didn't think about it. You lived in a

society. The society operated a certain way, and, at least, that's how it operated. I wore dresses, I wore lipstick, I combed my hair a certain way. That's the way my society operated, and I was not somebody that was any kind of a rebel.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. Okay. All right. So how long were you at this job?

Ms. Fuentes: About a year-and-a-half.

Ms. Alpert: All right. And then what happened? Where did you go after that?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, what happened was all of us in the . . . . By the way, the program for Honor Law Graduates turned out to be nothing. A title. We were working as lawyers like anybody else, okay? So, I was working there a year-and-a-half and somebody from the Justice Department called a meeting of all of us Honor Law Graduates in the Office of Alien Property—maybe of all the [Honor Law Graduate] lawyers in the Justice Department. And he said that the Office of Alien Property was being—this was 1959, about. . . . He said the Office of Alien Property was being phased out, that they were going to move a small cohort of people to the Justice Department itself—the main Justice Department—and then it would be absorbed within the Justice Department. It wouldn't exist at all. And that we all needed to find new jobs but that the Justice Department guaranteed that they would find all the law graduates, Honor Law Graduates, jobs. That sounded pretty good to me. But a man was standing next to me, and when the speaker said, "We guarantee that we will find all of you jobs," he said, "They can't do that." So, I turned around to him and I said, "What? A representative of the Justice Department is saying they will guarantee finding us all jobs, and you say he

can't do that?" I thought this guy was off his rocker.

Well, of course that guy turned out to be right. So, the first job I went for, with the help of the Justice Department, was in the Office of the U.S. Attorney for New York City. They had an opening. So, I went there, and I spent an entire day interviewing all the levels of hierarchy there, except the top guy. He was out that day. I had this whole series of interviews, and then they said to me could I come back the next day because this top guy was out today, but would be in tomorrow. So I said, "Sure."

So, I came in the next day to meet with this top guy. And he had a huge office. Like I had to walk from there to the front door—it was huge. And I am walking there, and then when I get to him, he says to me, "I thought you'd be older than you are."

So I said to him, "How could I be older than I am?" So, I didn't get that job.

Ms. Alpert: Not the right answer.

Ms. Fuentes: Not the right answer. So, then I got back to Washington, and I needed to find a job. So, there was a guy from the Office of Alien Property named Paul Elkind. And he had recently found a job. He was not on the Honor Program; he was just a lawyer there who found another job at the National Labor Relations Board. I knew as much about the National Labor Relations Board as you know about dancing *Swan Lake*. (And, for all I know, you are a ballerina.) So, I called up Paul, and I said, "Paul, you have just been looking for a job. You found one at the National Labor Relations Board. I'm looking for a job. Where do you recommend I go?" He said, "Come over here. There is a job here."



And he arranged for me to have a job interview with a guy named Lou Schwartz, who was some kind of a supervisor. So I come in, sit down and Lou Schwartz starts to interview me. And he said, "You applied for this job because you have an interest in labor law."

I said, "No."

He said, "Oh, did you ever study labor law in college or law school?"

I said, "No."

He said, "But if you get this job, you will take courses at George Washington University or Georgetown or someplace to study labor law."

I said, "It hadn't occurred to me."

He said, "Then, why are you here?"

I said, "I need a job."

He said, "You're hired."

So, I left the Office of Alien Property and went to work for the National Labor Relations Board. The weird thing is that they put me in a section called Advice—it had some other names—but one of the words was Advice. The National Labor Relations Board had regional offices all over the country. If the head of a regional office didn't know the answer to a legal question, it came to the Office of Advice. So, here you had the heads of the NLRB around the country who were stumped with unusual legal questions coming to me for advice. I didn't know the first thing about labor law. I had never studied it, never thought about it, nothing. I said, "That's the way things operate." So, I was there for a while and had a variety of jobs, I always wanted to get more experience, so I'd be on a job for a while, and then I'd go on another one.

So, that at one point, I was called into an office of somebody that I was working for, and he said, "You told me you wanted to go out west." I'd never been to California and I thought it would be interesting to go to California. So, that's why I asked him that I'd like to transfer to an office out west. So, I said, "Yes, I would." His name was "Curly" Summers; he was my boss. Harold X. Summers was his real name. And his brother was a guy named Summers who was an expert in economics and wrote a national column about it. So, he said, "Do you want to go out west? We are going to send you on a detail to Pittsburgh." (Pittsburgh was west of Washington.)

So, I went to Pittsburgh for three months. I learned a lot because I was working as a field investigator and a field attorney doing field work, you know, where the real complaints come in. And I did that for three months. I lived in Squirrel Hill, I rented a place in Squirrel Hill, which is where the Jews lived in the Pittsburgh area, and I made friends there, and I had a fine time.

Plus, it must have been 1960. It was the year that the Pittsburgh Pirates won the pennant. And they hadn't won in forever, or something like that. So, when I first got there, the people there didn't trust me. They thought I was there as a spy for the Washington office. Such a thing never occurred to anybody, but that's what they thought. Then, when the Pirates won the pennant—first of all, the whole town went crazy that day. Everybody left work, and the streets were full of people. It's a very sports-crazy town. So, then, when the Pirates won the pennant, the people in my office gave me credit because I was there that summer. So, then it turned around and they liked me. And I had a fine time for three months.

And, then, I returned to my job. The Board was divided into the General Counsel and the Board, and I was working—at that time I think I was working for—I guess it was work on the General Counsel’s side. But, at one point, I also worked for Boyd Leedhom, a Republican who was head of the Board. A pleasure to work for. You know, people would think he’s a Republican, I’m a Democrat. He never asked me how—or told me how—a case should be decided, or anything like that. I just wrote up the decisions the way they looked to me.

So, then some time passed, and I was again called into the office, and they said since I wanted to go west, they now could transfer me—the Labor Board had two offices in Los Angeles—to one of them. So, I was thrilled because I wanted to see California.

So, I moved from Washington and went to work for the Los Angeles office of the National Labor Relations Board.

And I also always had a vision of being in the entertainment industry because I have always told stories and I have always had a sense of humor. So, I rented an apartment in Hollywood, waiting to be discovered. Still waiting.

So, before I went, people told me the head of that L.A. office that I was going to was called Ralph Kennedy. And he was known to be a shit.

Ms. Alpert: Known to be a what?

Ms. Fuentes: A shit.

Ms. Alpert: Oh. Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: And several people said, “You don’t want to work for him.”

And I said, “What do I care who is the head of the office? I am going to go

and do my thing. And blah, blah, blah.” Well, they were right. So, I made a big error when I first went there. I was given a case to write up—a field office report—whatever it was called, and those reports were generally three pages typed. I didn’t know that. And I wrote a report that was sixty pages typed. Well, Ralph Kennedy couldn’t get over it. And he never stopped teasing me about it. I was there a year-and-a-half, and he never stopped teasing me about it. So, I started off on the wrong foot with that sixty-page report.

But, then, I had a good time there. I made some wonderful friends. I enjoyed Beverly Hills. I had friends in Beverly Hills—and very wealthy friends—and I enjoyed myself.

And, then, my parents were not happy with my going to Los Angeles because I was three thousand miles away from them. They were living in Long Beach, Long Island at the time, where my brother lived, and they never came out to see me. They wanted me to come back.

So, then, one time I was driving on a case to San Bernadino or something and I got caught in a sandstorm. And, some people knew about it; they had heard about it on the radio, but I didn’t. I didn’t know what was happening to me.

The sand was coming like this. I didn’t know whether to drive or pull over. I finally pulled over and just sat in the car. It turned out to be okay.

People were surprised that my car wasn’t damaged because usually those sandstorms scratch your windshield. But it wasn’t damaged. But I was scared as hell.

After that happened, I realized that California is the site of too many natural disasters. They have fires; they have earthquakes; I was caught in a sandstorm.

I decided to go back to Washington. And, also because Ralph Kennedy never let me forget about that report, and also he was a dirty old man. One time, I had a book somebody had given me, and it had some kind of sexual content, and he kept after me to borrow the book. So, I decided to go back.

So, at the Labor Board there was a very liberal, fine Democratic Board member named Gerald Brown. And he offered me to come back and work as one of his legal assistants. So I went—I left California after a year-and-a-half and returned to the East.

Ms. Alpert: Tell me a little bit about what the role of the National Labor Relations Board is. What do they do, so that—how you fit into that?

Ms. Fuentes: They enforced various laws. I think the first one was the Wagner Act; then, it was the Taft-Hartley Act. They enforced laws dealing with relations on the job between unions, employees, and the company. For example, they would hold elections. Let's say you work for a company, I work for the same company, we want to vote in a union that should represent us. You have to have an election for that. And the NLRB conducted those elections.

Now, I don't think I ever did that, but the other thing that they did was they processed complaints of discrimination under these laws: The Taft-Hartley law, whatever it was. I think it was the Taft-Hartley law. For example, I can't remember any of the specific cases at this point, but I think it would have been a violation, let's say if I joined the union—if there was a union for my company—and I joined it and the employer fired me for joining the union. That would be a violation of the law. So, people filed complaints . . . .

Ms. Alpert: And did they have hearings on those complaints, or who made the

determination?

Ms. Fuentes: It was before the hearing stage.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: So, somehow when I worked on the General Counsel's side, I was in the Advice section where I worked for this "Curly" Summers, but then when I worked for a Board member, I was writing decisions. . .

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: where there had been complaints, and I was making the decision and writing the decision.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: So, that's what I did.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. All right. So, from there did you . . . what happened?

Ms. Fuentes: So, now I go back, and I am working for Gerry Brown. A very nice guy. But my immediate supervisor was a woman named Helen Reiner.

But I don't remember if I said this in an earlier interview. From the age of ten, I felt that my life had been saved because there was something I was supposed to do in the world. And that came from three reasons: (1) My life was saved in the Holocaust. Well, before (1), my mother had had seven abortions before she became pregnant with me, and she went to have the eighth with me, and her favorite abortionist was out of the country. So, she was going to go to her second-favorite abortionist another day and my father said, "Ah, let it be already." So, I was only born because of this kind of a fluke. Secondly, I was bright, and, thirdly, my life was saved in the Holocaust—saved by the fact that we fled and got out. So, those three things. Now, I know now as an adult that

many people who, as Holocaust survivors, have feelings of guilt. I didn't have a feeling of guilt, but they have feelings of guilt, or survivor guilt, or they feel like me that they need to do something to make up for being saved. I didn't know that; I thought it was just me.

So, from the age of ten on, I knew that I couldn't just marry and have a family, that that was not an option for me because I had been saved to do something. I never discussed this with anybody because they would have thought I was wacko. But I had all this always with me.

So, whatever job I was on, I was always looking for the next job, which would be that job for which my life was saved. So, when I came back and I was working for Gerry Brown, I was always looking for that other job.

And there was an African American man who was a trial examiner at the National Labor Relations Board. His name was Art Christopher. And he liked women. So, he always used to ask. . . regularly took me out to lunch—holding the carrot that he knew people in organizations and could help me find a job.

So, I had a number of lunches with him, none of which produced anything.

So, then I had this African American friend, her name was Jackie Williams.

She is a friend of mine to this day. And I once bumped into her and she said, "How are you, Sonny?" (I was called "Sonny" in those days.) and I said, "Oh, I just had another one of those luncheons with Art Christopher. He's always promising me job contacts and nothing ever comes of it."

So, she said "You want a job? Go across the street." This guy, Charles T.

Duncan—Charlie Duncan, she called him—had been one of her professors at the Howard University School of Law, and at one point, he was the dean. I

don't remember whether this was later or at this time, but Jackie had been one of his students. He had just been made the general counsel of a new agency called the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And Jackie knew that, and she said, "Why don't you call him up? He's got openings." (I learned only in June when I was in Washington, and I had a dinner party, and Jackie was there and we talked about this—that she called Charlie after she told me to call him and told him about me, or that I was coming over, or whatever. I didn't know that.)

So, I had an interview with this Charles T. Duncan, and he was the new general counsel of this Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, whose mandate was to enforce and implement a new law called Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And that law prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. I knew nothing about any of this. I walk into his office, and he moves his arm across his desk, and he said, "You see this desk?"

I said, "Yes." He says, "This desk is full of applications for the one opening I have in the General Counsel's Office." And, then, he said, "I don't know why, but I am going to hire you."

So, I took that job. And I left Gerry Brown at the NLRB, and I went to work in the Office of the General Counsel at the EEOC, which at that time consisted of four people: the General Counsel, Charlie Duncan; Dick Berg, Deputy General Counsel, I was next in age or job responsibility; and the fourth one was a young, male lawyer called John Dalessio.

Ms. Alpert: So, you were the first woman lawyer at the EEOC?



Ms. Fuentes: No, I was the first woman lawyer in the Office of the General Counsel.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. All right. All right. Okay. So, where did that lead?

Ms. Fuentes: Ah, the rest of my life. I am still doing it. So, you have to be more specific.

Ms. Alpert: Well, once you went to work there, as you said you knew nothing about discrimination . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: I had no background in women's rights; no background in labor law, which was—not a lot of background—I'd had already eight years. The interesting thing was that Title VII was modeled on the National Labor Relations Act.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: So, that I actually had a good background for that job, but I didn't know it.

Ms. Alpert: You didn't know it.

Ms. Fuentes: But I really didn't have a deep background in labor law. I had never studied labor law, and I knew nothing about women's rights. Absolutely. Never entered my mind.

Ms. Alpert: And you said—you know, you never—it's just was—that's how the world was. It never occurred to you.

Ms. Fuentes: Correct.

Ms. Alpert: But didn't you have some experiences in the quest for looking for a job where you didn't get hired because you were a woman?

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. But I didn't put it together.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: I did, and I can tell you what they were. They are in my memoir. I certainly did. But let's say you were turned down for a few jobs because you were wearing a black sweater, and the employers don't like black sweaters. You

might get turned down for several jobs. They wouldn't tell you it's because you were wearing a black sweater. Or else, it didn't occur to you that that was it.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: You didn't put it together. You said, "Gee, I've had four job interviews recently, I did well in law school, and this and that. How come I'm not getting . . . ." You didn't put it together that way. You know, when you get turned down for jobs—it's not that unusual to get turned down for a job. I never put it together as women's rights because there wasn't such a thing. There wasn't a thing called women's rights.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. So, when you started with the EEOC and this discrimination . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah.

Ms. Alpert: This was something that had not occurred to you that was going on.

Ms. Fuentes: Correct.

Ms. Alpert: Even as . . .

Ms. Fuentes: But I was very interested in discrimination against blacks.

Ms. Alpert: I was going to say because at the time in the country . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah.

Ms. Alpert: that was very prevalent . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Right.

Ms. Alpert: and also there, you know, over the years, there has been discrimination against Jews, so . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Yes.

Ms. Alpert: It must have been something that you were somewhat familiar with, that you could identify with.

Ms. Fuentes: I was very. . . . It resonated with me because as a Jew who had to leave Germany, I was very sensitive to anti-Semitism. And as someone who drove from childhood on . . . drove through the South with my parents, and I saw the “Colored” and “White” drinking fountains, benches, buses, everything, water fountains, and racist headlines in the newspapers, like in Georgia, that hit me like a ton of bricks. I never got over it. And I was ten when we started going to the Miami Beach area. I never got over that. I have had a lifelong concern with discrimination. But, against Jews, yes; against Blacks, yes; every other group; but women I hadn’t considered.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. So this was an eye-opening experience to have this happen.

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. Well, what was eye-opening was that for the first year or so, the EEOC wasn’t enforcing that part of the law.

Ms. Alpert: Because?

Ms. Fuentes: Two reasons: (maybe more) One, the law as initially drafted . . . well, first of all the law was in response to the Civil Rights Movement for blacks, that’s why this law was passed. That’s number one: it was in response to that. Number (2), until the latter days of the debate on the law, the law prohibited employment discrimination by employers, employment agencies, and labor unions based on race, color, religion and national origin. It did not include sex discrimination. Towards the latter part of the debate of the law, a segregationist Congressman named Howard Smith from Virginia got up and introduced an amendment to also prohibit sex discrimination. Now, his

motivations were not clear. On the one hand, he was a segregationist: he opposed the Civil Rights Act altogether and voted against it when it came up later on. On the other hand, he had ties to Alice Paul, head of the National Woman's Party. And they didn't want black women gaining rights at the expense of white women.

And, so, it's not clear whether his motivation was to kill the act—which he did want to kill or delay it—or if he saw the act was going to pass and he didn't want blacks gaining rights over white women. It's not clear.

Once he introduced that amendment, nobody was going to get up and ask that it be taken away. In addition, Congresswoman Martha Griffiths, who later became lieutenant governor of the State of Michigan—a hero of mine—told me in 1986—and this has been written up by others—in 1986, when I and two other women made a reunion of NOW founders, that if Howard Smith hadn't introduced the amendment to include sex, she would have.

So that amendment . . . so, when the EEOC started up operations in July of 1965, there were one-hundred people there—employees. They had all come there to do something about race discrimination in employment in the United States. They didn't want the agency's resources, time and money, diverted to this sex discrimination thing, which came out of left field.

So, the first reason they weren't doing anything about it was that that's not why they came there. They didn't want the resources devoted to this cockamamie thing—whatever it was—women's rights. The second reason was that the sex discrimination prohibitions of the act raised issues of legal interpretation that were very difficult. The race discrimination, no question. If

a black man came for a job and he could do it, you had to hire him. It was a black-and-white situation. Whereas women's rights, there are a host of issues raised. Did you have to hire a pregnant woman when she came to work? Could you fire an employee when she became pregnant? If a pregnant woman took time off, did you have to pay her? Did you have to give her the time off? What about state protective laws? The states had all these laws. Initially, the labor union people wanted to pass laws for men and women due to the sweatshop conditions. They wanted them to have better working conditions. But they couldn't get the laws passed for men and women. So, they said, "Half a loaf is better than none," and they got them passed for women. So, these laws limited the hours women could work. You had to provide benches and rest periods for women. They couldn't work at night, and different things like that. And people like Esther Peterson, who was a big mucky-muck in the Labor Department, and a woman named Mary Keyserling, who was head of the Women's Bureau in the Labor Department, these people had fought for these labor laws for women and they didn't want Title VII to supersede these laws, which Title VII—as a lawyer, you know a federal law is going to supersede conflicting state law. So, that was another area the EEOC didn't know what to do about—state protective laws—and especially those people. . . . Herman Edelsberg was one, the executive director of the EEOC, was anti-women's rights. So was Dick Berg, the deputy general counsel. So, these people who didn't want to do anything for women were delighted that people like Esther Peterson didn't want the state protective laws struck down. Other women, like me, did. So, they said, "Well, what can we do? We

don't know what women want." So, they seized on that.

Another area was sex segregated classified advertising columns. The newspapers had always had classified advertising columns segregated on the basis of sex. If you were a man who was an engineer, you would look in the classifieds "Help Wanted-Male, because engineering jobs would be there. If you were a typist, you would look in "Help Wanted-Female." Plus, the contents of the ad would say, "Looking for Girl Friday to do my typing," or whatever. Or "Looking for a strong man to be a bouncer," or, whatever it was. It had always been thus.

Newspapers loved it because they got double. If some jobs—where you would be willing—let's say a salesperson, where you might be willing—a waiter, a waitress—you might be willing to hire both sexes, then you had to place two ads, "Help Wanted-Female" and "Help Wanted-Male." So, the newspapers liked this.

Along comes this small agency, the EEOC, with one-hundred people, and they are going to disturb this nationwide practice of advertising?

Another big issue was flight cabin attendants. It went back and forth, but at this time in our history, domestic airlines hired only women as flight cabin attendants for domestic flights. For overseas, they hired only men. And they had cockamamie reasons why it made sense to hire only women domestically and only pursers, as they were called, for international flights.

And, then, they fired or grounded the women when they got to be thirty-two or thirty-five or married. So, they saved having to pay them pensions and retirement because by thirty-two or thirty-five, they were out of that job. So,

their argument was that Title VII doesn't apply because Title VII deals with equality, and we hire only women. So, equality doesn't come into play. And we can do anything we want with these women because Title VII isn't applicable. So, we can require that they have a certain weight and a certain height and that they get grounded when they are thirty-two or thirty-five, and this and that. Another big area.

So, here the agency didn't act because (1) it didn't want to act in this area, and (2) they didn't know how the hell to resolve these questions.

So, I was working there, and while I came with no agenda, I certainly could read the statute, which wasn't all that long, and I saw that it prohibited gender discrimination, sex discrimination—there was no gender discrimination language in those days. So, I read it, and I thought the agency should be enforcing that part of the law. It wasn't, so I became increasingly frustrated. My boss, Charlie Duncan, who, when I went to work there, had no special feelings for sex discrimination. But he was very educable, and I educated him. And he changed, and he turned around.

But he took to calling me a "sex maniac" because whatever issue came up that we were discussing, I would say, "Well, what about sex discrimination?" So, he took to calling me a "sex maniac." Okay.

Ms. Alpert: Now, at some point did it occur to you when you were there that this was the thing that you had been saved to do, that it resonated, this was your calling?

Ms. Fuentes: Not until NOW was founded.

Ms. Alpert: Okay, so not in the beginning.

Ms. Fuentes: No, but when NOW was founded, yes.

Ms. Alpert:        Okay, all right. So, on that note, let's stop for today.

Ms. Fuentes:       Okay.

Ms. Alpert:        And, we'll schedule another time.

Ms. Fuentes:       Wonderful.

Ms. Alpert:        It's a fascinating story.

Ms. Fuentes:       Thank you.

Ms. Alpert:        Thank you so much, Sonia.

Ms. Fuentes:       Thank you for doing it, Liz.



ORAL HISTORY OF  
SONIA PRESSMAN FUENTES  
ON BEHALF OF WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LAW  
A PROJECT OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION  
SENIOR LAWYERS DIVISION

BY LIZ ALPERT  
THIRD INTERVIEW

OCTOBER 19, 2013

Ms. Alpert: This is Liz Alpert, and I am here with Sonia Pressman Fuentes. And this is the third in a series of interviews that we are doing concerning her trailblazing as a woman feminist in the early sixties and seventies during the second wave of the women's movement. And today is October the 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013. And, thank you again, Sonia, for doing this project.

And when we talked last, we were talking about your early days at the EEOC, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and we were talking about some of the discriminatory laws, or practices really, that were in effect at the time, such as airlines only hiring women to be stewardesses and then when they reached a certain age, then they were fired.

We were talking about the employment ads in newspapers that specifically were discriminatory against jobs for men or for women, and those were kind of standard practices at the time.

As a new employee at the EEOC, what hit you, or what came to you that this is something that should be pursued as far as sex discrimination because you were saying that at the beginning of the EEOC, really it was for race discrimination. People weren't really looking into the sex discrimination issues.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, let me first comment on a couple of things you said. When you spoke about the airlines, they hired only women as flight cabin attendants in the United States. But, overseas, they hired only men, and they called them pursers. And, as you said, when the stewardesses reached the age of thirty-two or thirty-five or married, they were either grounded or terminated. And that was one area about which the EEOC got many complaints right at the beginning of its being a functioning agency.

Newspapers were doing two things: they had sex-segregated advertising columns, "Help Wanted-Male" and "Help-Wanted-Female," and, in addition, employers in the content of their ads could express a preference for men or women. So, many ads were looking for a "Girl Friday," for example. Or, if they were looking for an engineer, they would blatantly say they were looking for a man for an engineer's position. And before Title VII, that kind of advertising was lawful.

Now, to get to your question, what I noticed the first year or so at the EEOC, which at that time had about one hundred permanent employees, was. . . let me go back a little bit.

Title VII prohibited discrimination in employment based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. And most of the employees—the people who were working at the EEOC and the commissioners—had come there because of the Civil Rights Movement, which preceded the passage of Title VII and which was responsible for the passage of Title VII. Most of the employees of the EEOC had come there to do something about discrimination based on race or color. That was their motivation. Also, as a piece of

background, the prohibition against sex discrimination in employment by employers, labor unions, and employment agencies did not come in until the latter stages of the debate about Title VII, and the legislators were really not prepared, by and large, to deal with that prohibition. But after Congressman Howard Smith introduced it, nobody was going to get up and suggest that it be deleted. So, the Act was passed with this prohibition against sex discrimination in it, but it was a surprise to the legislators and the United States—they weren't prepared for it.

Ms. Alpert: So, this almost didn't happen, that we had sex discrimination included in this Equal Opportunity Act .

Ms. Fuentes: Well, yes and no. Congresswoman Martha Griffiths, who later became lieutenant governor of Michigan, said to me—and, I am sure, to others—that if Howard Smith hadn't introduced it, she was ready to. Be that as it may, what happened is what happened. So, when I was at the EEOC, whenever anyone in the General Counsel . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: So, whenever we discussed issues at the EEOC, I always raised the question of discrimination based on sex, so much so that my boss, Charlie Duncan, the general counsel, took to calling me a "sex maniac" because I was always raising the question of sex discrimination.

It didn't take me too long to realize that the commission was not really interested in implementing the sex discrimination prohibitions of the act and was not aggressively enforcing those provisions for two reasons: (1) the issues presented by claims of sex discrimination raised difficult legal questions that were not raised by claims of discrimination based on race or color. This was a

new field for this country, a new area. There had been, I just recently read a book called *Survival in the Doldrums*, about some earlier periods. I used to say that there were no women's rights activities after we got the vote in 1920 until the early sixties, but I was wrong about that. I recently read a book called *Survival in the Doldrums*, which talks about part of that period—I'd have to check—between 1920 and the early 1960s. And it talks about the fact that there was a good deal of activity. Most of it was by the National Woman's Party. (Coincidentally, I served on its Board for many years.) Most of it was by the National Woman's Party, and they were—after we got the vote in 1920—that organization and other women continued the fight for women's rights. But as the authors of *Survival in the Doldrums* point out, this was a small group of women, an elite group of women. It wasn't any kind of a national movement, and most people didn't even know about it.

So, there was no major national movement before the Equal Pay Act was passed and Title VII was passed, although there had been efforts to introduce the Equal Pay Act for many, many years before it was enacted. But there was no national movement for women's rights between 1920 and the early 1960s so as to let people know how to interpret the sex discrimination prohibitions of Title VII.

So, one of the reasons the EEOC didn't do anything was because they really didn't know how to interpret provisions of the act, such as you couldn't discriminate against somebody who was pregnant, for example. Now, that is not a specific provision of the act but that was covered by the act. Well, the EEOC didn't know how to implement that and many other things that they did

not know how to implement. That was one reason why they weren't doing anything in this field.

The second reason was that, as I mentioned earlier, most of the commissioners and the staff had come to the EEOC to fight for the rights of African Americans. They did not want the commission's time and resources and money being spent on this—to them—totally new issue of sex discrimination. That is not what they came to the EEOC for. So, that was the second reason why nothing was happening with regard to women's rights.

Ms. Alpert: So, were you instrumental in starting to make things happen because you kept after them to enforce these sex discrimination issues?

Ms. Fuentes: Yes, but I didn't accomplish it just by keeping after people within the commission, which was something I did. Because I was a lone woman lawyer there—I mean—there were other women lawyers there, but I was, in this battle, I was on my own, except for some commissioners, Aileen Hernandez and Dick Graham, who were also interested in the prohibition against sex discrimination. But, among staffers, I was really the only one.

There was another woman lawyer there, Van Swift, who worked as a legal assistant to the vice chairman, Luther Holcomb, but she did not want to stick her neck out on women's issues. So, she was not outspoken about it as I was. So, what I did do was, first of all, somehow—and I don't know how this happened—I and other men and women at mid-level positions of the federal government, such as I was, we formed an informal network of information - sharing. And these were people like Phineas Indritz, a man who worked on the Hill; Mary Eastwood worked in the Department of Justice; Catherine East, she

was on the Advisory Commission; other women, Caruthers Berger, Morag Simchak--we all started—and Marguerite Rawalt, who was not in the federal government but she was a private attorney. We somehow met each other and communicated all the time on what was going on. And I would communicate with them about cases coming up at the EEOC. And what would happen then, that information would go from me to, perhaps, Mary Eastwood, and then to Marguerite Rawalt. And Marguerite Rawalt developed a cadre of private practice attorneys who were willing to take on sex discrimination cases. So, that was one of the things that we were doing through this network. And the other thing that I did . . .

Ms. Alpert: How were you communicating through . . .?

Ms. Fuentes: Telephone.

Ms. Alpert: Were you calling around and . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Telephone or we would meet in person. There was no email at that time.

Ms. Alpert: I know.

Ms. Fuentes: The other thing that happened was either in late sixty-five or early sixty-six, Betty Friedan came to the EEOC. Her intention was to interview my boss, the general counsel, Charlie Duncan, and his assistant, the deputy general counsel, Dick Berg. She had, as you know, in 1963 published the groundbreaking *The Feminine Mystique*. So, in the end of—toward the end of—1965, the beginning of 1966, she planned to write a second book on all the progress she thought women had made since the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. So, she came into the Office of the General Counsel, she saw me there—a woman—so, she came to me, and she said, “What are the problems here?”

What are the conflicts? What's going on?" And, I said to myself, "If I tell this woman writer what's going on here, I am going to lose my job." So, I said to her, "Everything is fine here; everything is good."

So, then, a couple of weeks later, she came back again. And she happened to come back at a time when I'd had it up to my neck with the fact that the EEOC wasn't moving ahead for women. And I couldn't take it anymore, and I didn't care anymore. So, I invited her into the privacy of my office, and I told her what was going on. And I said to her that what this country needs is an organization to fight for women like the NAACP fights for, and I probably would have said, "Negroes," in those days. And a number of other people have since said they said the same thing to Betty Friedan. But, in her book, *It Changed My Life*, and in an article she wrote in 1973 for *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, she credited me with giving her that idea, that what this country needed was an organization to fight for women like the NAACP fought for its constituents.

So, then there was a meeting in June 1966 in Washington, D.C. It was the Third Conference of the Commissions on the Status of Women nationwide. I was not at that meeting. And at that meeting, the women present wanted to pass a resolution that Dick Graham should be reappointed as a commissioner of the EEOC. They'd heard a rumor—and Dick Graham later told me it wasn't true—but they heard a rumor that Dick Graham would not be reappointed to the commission because he was a feminist, and they also wanted to pass a resolution that the EEOC should strongly enforce Title VII for women.

So, this Third Conference of the Commissions on the Status of Women was

run under the aegis of the Labor Department, the United States Labor Department. And I don't know if I am pronouncing that word right—a e g i s—but I think it is *aegis*, whatever. And one government agency cannot pass a resolution telling another government agency what to do. So, the people from the Labor Department told those women at the meeting that they did not have the authority to pass those resolutions. Now, I wasn't at that meeting, as I said, but what I understand is that the women there got incensed that they were told that they couldn't pass a resolution. I don't know if they didn't understand that the reason was because one government agency can't tell another one what to do. But they just saw it as being told that they didn't have the authority to pass resolutions. So, they got upset, and that night they met in Betty Freidan's hotel room. And, the next day at lunch, Betty Friedan wrote on a napkin that they were founding a new organization to bring women into the mainstream of American society NOW. And twenty-eight women who were present at that meeting each threw five dollars into a war chest, whatever you want to call it, and that was the beginning of NOW.

Ms. Alpert: And NOW is . . .

Ms. Fuentes: The National Organization for Women. So, that was in June of 1966. On Halloween weekend of October 1966, there was a second meeting. At the second meeting, I was present and, at the second meeting, we drew up a Statement of Purpose and skeletal bylaws. And another twenty-one men and women signed up at that meeting. And I consider the forty-nine men and women who signed up at those two meetings the founders of NOW.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. Now you talked about you were at, or these women were at, the Third, I



guess, meeting . . .

Ms. Fuentes: The Third Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. How did the Commissions on the Status of Women get started? So, there must have been a first and second.

Ms. Fuentes: Oh, they were called Commissions on the Status of Women. I was not involved in that. I can't answer your question as to how they got started.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. You just know that this was the third one, and so this is what happened.

Ms. Fuentes: Right. And there are now throughout the United States Commissions on the Status of Women. There is one in Sarasota, but it is independent. Most of them are connected to the state, but the one in Sarasota is independent. But there are now such Commissions on the Status of Women.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. So tell me about the early days then of the National Organization for Women. You formed it, then what happens?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, when we formed it, NOW was right away very active. It was picketing the White House and the EEOC for not doing its job and for not doing anything about segregated classified advertising. It filed complaints, as I recall . . . I'd have to look at my memoir where I spell out everything. It got publicity. It generally mobilized public opinion and it filed lawsuits. It mobilized public opinion with the principal aim of getting the EEOC to aggressively enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And what was your involvement—what did you—was there anything specifically you did?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, there was an idea that I had, and then there's something specifically that I did. Just to show the level of frustration that we had in those days, I seriously

suggested once to a group of feminists that we should destroy the presses of the *Washington Post* because we were in Washington, D.C.—the *Washington Post* was the leading newspaper, not only Washington, D.C., but it's one of the country's leading newspapers—and they, of course, were continuing to maintain sex -segregated classified advertising columns and allowing sexist content in their classified advertising. Now, keep in mind this was advantageous for newspapers because if an employer wanted to hire somebody, let's say an employer didn't discriminate and he wanted to hire somebody. He had to place double ads and pay twice. He had to place that ad in "Help Wanted-Male" and "Help Wanted-Female." So, this was advantageous to the newspapers. So, I was so frustrated about that that I seriously suggested that we bomb—or whatever I had in mind, I don't know that I used the word *bomb*—but I wanted to destroy the presses. Fortunately, nobody paid any attention to me.

What I did do was—we started meeting—about three or four of us started to meet in the home of Mary Eastwood, who was a founder of NOW and lived in Southwest Washington. And people meeting there would be me; Mary; Phineas Indritz, a lawyer that I mentioned who used to work on the Hill, but he also worked for many do-good organizations, he worked largely in the area of veterans, but he also worked against—on discrimination based on race; and also Caruthers Berger, who I think was in the Department of Labor. And we used to meet in Mary's apartment, and I would share with this group what was going on at the EEOC with regard to women, and what the EEOC wasn't doing that I thought it should be doing. Now, of course, this is highly improper—

you are not supposed to tell what's going on in the councils of an agency to people outside the agency. But that's what I was doing.

And, then, we would discuss it. And, then, we would draft letters from NOW saying, "How come you are not doing anything about this? How come you did that? How come you did the other?" and sending these letters to the EEOC, the commission. I always say it was amazing to me that nobody at the EEOC ever raised the question, "How did these people know what we are doing in our meetings?" But that question never came up. I don't know what the effect of those letters was. We never heard anything back about them, to my knowledge. But that is something that I was doing.

Ms. Alpert: To people listening to this now, and by "now," I mean in the present—not the National Organization for Women—who didn't live through these times. Maybe you could set the stage a little bit in terms of, you know, especially women now who don't see and don't remember how women were discriminated against and somehow say to themselves, "Well, I'm not a feminist," when really they are living that kind of feminist lifestyle. During that period of time, people did not really look at—you know—sex-segregated ads as being discriminatory. All of this seemed very normal. So, when you were doing this, you know, set the stage for—like the climate, the mood, and how your efforts were looked at by the general public.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, it's an excellent question and comes up with me often. I do a great deal of public speaking, and if I am speaking to young women and I start to tell them what the world was like before 1965, their mouths just drop open. They can't conceive of it. They weren't alive at those times and they just can't

believe—because we live in such a different world today—that this was the situation that existed at that time.

And let me also say that, with very few exceptions, all of us living in this society pretty much accepted the way it was. That's just the way it was. For example, women and men in our society share some clothes that were alike, but we all wear slacks, but there are other clothes that the average man doesn't wear—a dress. The average woman doesn't wear a tuxedo, and we are not going up on—what is it when you go up on a stool like they do in Britain and make a speech? We are not going up on our high horses or whatever to complain that men and women wear different clothes in this country. We accept that. Similarly, men and women had totally different roles before 1965 and, by and large, everybody accepted it. It was the way things were.

What were those different roles? A woman's role was to get married and have a family. She could work for a few years before she got married, but once she got married, it was generally accepted then that she would leave her work within a short time, because her function was to be a homemaker and a wife and a mother. This actually never made sense for many people who were poor and had to work, such as domestic servants, or whatever their family required, but still this was the vision for America: that the woman is a housewife and a mother. The man's job was to support—to make a living financially—for his family. Now, these stereotypes had nothing to do with what the individual actually was. You could have a man who was a marvelous chef, let's say, and you could have a woman who was a terrific painter. But these stereotypes did not take account of those individual differences. Women were supposed to be

wives and mothers, and men were supposed to be breadwinners. And the woman who did not make it to get married was considered an “old maid,” which was a term of opprobrium. And the view of her was that she was some elderly spinster sitting in somebody’s back room and certainly an “old maid” was not a person of respect. Men were understood to have sexual experiences before they got married. But it is an interesting question—with whom? Because women were not supposed to have sexual experiences before they got married. And I always think it is interesting. For many years now, women I know or men I know will say, “Oh, my daughter is living with this guy.” or “My son is living with this woman.” Nobody would have ever talked about that in the past, before 1965. You would not say you had a daughter living with somebody. Oh my God! Who would admit such a thing? Men also were not to take any interest in the running of their homes and in the raising of their children. They were not to change diapers; they were not to be involved in childcare or the education of their children—that was the woman’s sphere—and a man had a different sphere. So, there were very few jobs also that were considered appropriate for women. A woman could be a sales clerk, at various times in her history, she could be an airline stewardess. She could be a piano teacher. She could be a telephone operator. She could be a librarian. But she wouldn’t be the President; she wouldn’t be the governor; she wouldn’t be the chief of police; she wouldn’t be a famous painter; she wouldn’t be an engineer; she wouldn’t be a supervisor or a manager. The occupations that were considered appropriate for her were limited. They were lower-paying and they were lower on the scale. In some states, criminal sentences for the same crime

were longer for women than for men. Because it was considered that women are, by their nature, nicer people. Therefore, if a woman committed a crime, she must really be some terrible creature, and let's give her a longer sentence. So, in some states, there were longer sentences for women who committed certain crimes. Women could not be, in certain states, executrixes or administrators of estates. That had to go to a man. And, you know, they wouldn't be airline pilots; they wouldn't be band members. There is an interesting book about women who became band members during the Second World War because the men left. But when the men came back from the Army, those women and their bands were told to go back home.

What did you want to ask me?

Ms. Alpert: Jury duty, too. I think it's kind of little known that women weren't put on juries.

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. Correct. Their place was in the home. A jury is not a home. Their place was in the home. They were also considered to be easily excited. You know there are all kinds of stereotypes for women.

Ms. Alpert: Too delicate for . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah. Too delicate; could easily become hysterical, upset, not very strong emotionally. So, we also—and they were on a pedestal-- at the same time they were on a pedestal as being these wonderful, nurturing creatures. And that went along with the fact that you didn't want them doing all kinds of jobs which weren't suitable for such delicate creatures.

Ms. Alpert: Which also then affected the amount of pay they could make.

Ms. Fuentes: Absolutely.

Ms. Alpert: It affected whether they had a decent retirement and many things in women's lives that just weren't considered.

Ms. Fuentes: Well that's a whole—the retirement fits right in because one of the early things that we had to deal with at the EEOC was the fact that women were given lower pension benefits because women as a class lived longer than men. So, if I worked for an agency, let's say, or for a particular employer, for twenty years, and a man worked for the employer for twenty years, when we both retired, he would get a higher pension because women as a class lived longer than men. It didn't matter that I, as an individual, might live longer or shorter. So, retirement was a particular form of discrimination.

Ms. Alpert: So, it kind of was a double sort of penalty because the women generally earned less, which would mean a lower pension, but then even if they earned the same amount, their pension would be lower because they figured they were going to have to pay it over a longer period of time .

Ms. Fuentes: Absolutely. Absolutely. It always worked every which way. For example, when I was working in the federal government, there was a place called the Federal Executive Institute in Charlottesville, Virginia that trained—the higher grades in the federal government were fifteen and sixteen, and then seventeen and eighteen were considered supergrades. That's the top that you could get. So, there was a Federal Executive Institute in Charlottesville, Virginia that had an eight-week training program for people who were in grades fifteen or sixteen so that they would be trained and could become seventeen and eighteen. There were similar training programs throughout the country for federal employees. I happen to know about this Federal Executive

Institute in Charlottesville. I am going to tell you how I happen to know about it. So, I learned about this, and I said, "Wait a minute. If this is training given to grades fifteen and sixteen, since women, for reasons of discrimination and the whole way that society treats them, rarely get to grades fifteen and sixteen, not only don't they get to grades fifteen and sixteen, they are not going to have this training that would enable them to move up because they didn't get to grades fifteen and sixteen in the first place. So, as you said, there is a double whammy. So, I got together with Tina Hobson, who was with the Civil Service Commission Women's Program at the time, and we complained to the Civil Service Commission, which later became the Office of Personnel Management, that this was a double whammy, and it was discrimination against women. So, the Civil Service Commission had a special week for ten women in the government: Tina was one, I was one, eight other women, at the Federal Executive Institute in Charlottesville. They did an experiment that ten of us could get a week's training. (The real course was eight weeks.) And, after that week, they opened it up to women.

Ms. Alpert: Interesting. Yeah, these are things again that most of us don't even think about anymore, that were going on at the time. So, when you and the other women were doing these things, what kind of reception did you receive?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, you know, one of the weapons that you use against a group that is trying to effect change is ridicule. What I say in speeches is that the weapon used against people who want to expand rights for African Americans is violence. A traditional weapon used against women who want to expand their rights was ridicule.



And this was just a brand new idea for the country, although I don't want to say we came up with it in 1848, you had the Seneca Falls meeting where women demanded the vote and rights for women. So, you've had at least a prior movement, and you had Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

You've had other movements before, but basically when this started in 1965, people were not ready for it. And it was greeted with ridicule. And, you know: "Why are you taking up our time with this kind of thing? There are more important things that we need to be doing," and that kind of thing.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. So you were still working at the EEOC when you are doing all of this. Were you getting ridicule or, you know, pressure from your fellow EEOC employees, members, to say, "Sonia, stop doing this."?

Ms. Fuentes: Not much. A little bit. There were two people that come to mind. I previously mentioned Luther Holcomb. He was appointed by Lyndon Johnson to be vice chairman. He really didn't favor women's rights. He came out of—he was a former minister, he came from Texas. He had been involved in fighting for rights for African Americans. He didn't really care about women's rights. So, and now let me also say that somewhere after about the first year, the EEOC turned around because of NOW and because of all of this that was going on, and they began to enforce the act for women. All right.

So, Charlie Duncan, the general counsel, assigned me the job of writing the lead decision in the airline stewardess cases. And Luther Holcomb, the vice chairman, learned of this—knew of this—and he asked Charlie Duncan to take me off that assignment because I was "prejudiced." What did he mean by

“prejudiced”? I favored equal rights. He viewed that as being prejudiced.

Charlie Duncan, to his everlasting credit, turned him down. I wrote that decision.

Another person who didn't favor women's rights was Dick Berg, the deputy general counsel. He was a young man, I mean Luther Holcomb was an older man; Dick Berg was a younger man. So, you would think he would be more liberal, but he didn't favor women's rights. He was married to a woman from Europe, and I think she was—I never met her—but I would think she didn't have these kinds of modern views. But I don't know. He thought a woman's place was in the home. But he didn't do anything to me about what I was doing; he just didn't agree. And, of course, he was in a higher position, but there was nothing that he did to change me.

Another man who was opposed to women's rights was Herman Edelsberg. He was the executive director of the EEOC. He also didn't favor women's rights. And I remember I once was in his office talking to him about it, and when I left the tears were rolling—and I was going home for the day—the tears were rolling down my face because Herman Edelsberg was the executive director of the agency; I was just a lawyer there. And I was coming up against big men in high positions with power. I had none. And my feeling was, “How did I get into this position where I am fighting with men who have power and I don't have it? Nobody elected me to this. How did I get into this?”

Ms. Alpert: So, it wasn't—definitely wasn't—an easy road for you to take to start being involved in pushing for women's rights, was it?

Ms. Fuentes: No, but I never thought about that.

Ms. Alpert: You just didn't look at it that way.

Ms. Fuentes: It was there. It needed to be done. And remember that I did have the support of people who were similarly minded in other agencies of the government. It wasn't easy. I was aware of that. But it never occurred to me not to do it.

Ms. Alpert: Now, you started going around and speaking, for instance, in December of 1965.

Ms. Fuentes: That was my first one.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. That was your first one?

Ms. Fuentes: Yes.

Ms. Alpert: That you went and you talked. Tell us about that, you went and talked to the . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Well, that was on behalf of the EEOC. I would go around the country. . . . Generally, as I recall, people, requested speakers. Employers, for example, wanted to know what was this new law because they were required to conform to this new law, as we are required to conform to all laws.

Ms. Alpert: And the new law was Title VII?

Ms. Fuentes: Title VII. And they wanted to know what did that law require? What was required of them? So, I went around giving—that first talk was not to an employer's group; it was to the United Auto Workers Union, which had a women's department, women's bureau, I forget what it was called. And, so, my first talk was to that UAW group, but I did go around the country speaking to whoever was looking for a speaker. In Washington, too.

Ms. Alpert: And, when you did that, again, describe a little bit the reception you received. Or, did they just take in the information, or, you know, what did you feel like—how they were looking at what they had to do?

Ms. Fuentes: I don't remember anything specific. Except one request. I once had a request in Washington to speak at the Army and Navy Club about Title VII. And, then, I got a call from somebody there, and they said to me, "You know, you will not be able to come in the front door because women are not allowed to enter the front door. You will come in a side entrance."

I said, "You have got to be kidding me. You are asking me to come and speak about equal opportunity and I should come in a side door?"

So, he said, "Well, we don't allow any women to come in the front because men live at the Army and Navy Club, and they might be walking around in their underwear."

And, I said, "Well, I've seen men in underwear before. It's ridiculous."

And I refused. I did not give that speech. And I think Clifford Alexander was the chairman at that time. And he called me in to discuss that, and I think he then agreed that he would give that talk himself or something like that, or he was concerned about something. He was concerned because people were requesting that I come as a speaker rather than him. He was the chairman.

But, somehow, that tied in with my refusing to give this talk, and he called me in about this matter. But I didn't give that talk.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. All right. So, then, describe kind of your next steps then in your career as this . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Well, so I joined the EEOC—it was October 4, 1965. And, then, somewhere around 1973, thereabouts, I was in charge of a section of the General Counsel's Office, I think it was the Office of Compliance Management, but I am not sure, but I was in charge of a section. The chairman at that time was a guy named Bill Brown, who was African American, and I think that he was interested in promoting African Americans at the EEOC and not white women. So, I was told that there was an African American man working in the General Counsel's Office who was also head of a section like I was. His name was George Darden. And he was known for always sleeping at his desk. And somebody came and told me that my section and his section were about to be combined and that he would become the head of the combined section. And I said, "What?" I mean, the one thing this guy was known for was sleeping at his desk.

So, I went up to see Bill Brown, the chairman, and I said, "I understand the two sections are going to be combined and that George Darden is going to be the head of the combined section. Would you tell me why?"

And he said he couldn't tell me why. He didn't tell me why. Didn't tell me why. So, I went back to my office.

And, then, as much as they wanted to promote African Americans at that time, they couldn't stomach giving it to George Darden. So, the next thing they decided to do was to bring in an African American woman from the Justice Department named Issie Jenkins, who was a fine attorney over at the Justice Department, but knew nothing about the EEOC. And they were bringing her over, and they asked me to teach her what she needed to know to have the job I was supposed to get.

So, I said, "No way am I going to do that. I will find myself another job."

Ms. Alpert: So, why were they looking for a woman attorney. Wouldn't that have been unusual?

Ms. Fuentes: Because you are talking 1973, and companies now realized they have to hire women. Pure result of the Equal Pay Act and Title VII and the women's movement.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: That's why. So, the man who had the job was one of my favorite people. Unfortunately he's no longer alive. His name was George Shertzer. He was a Democrat. He was general counsel of the GTE Service Corporation, and he interviewed me and offered me the job. And I said, "I am already making \$30,000 a year." So, he gave me \$40,000.

And I gave my notice at the EEOC and prepared to go to Stamford, Connecticut to work for the GTE Service Corporation.

Ms. Alpert: And what was your role then?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, initially there was just a General Counsel's Office—a general office. And I went to work for that legal department of the General Counsel's Office. Not long after I . . . .

And then there was a whole thing where George Shertzer called me in and said that I was going to be the Jackie Robinson of the company because they were going to invite me to the Executive Dining Room, and they had never had a woman there before. So, I said to him, "Well, I don't know anything about baseball, but I'll do my best."

So, I was the first woman in the Executive Dining Room.

So, then they were dividing the legal department into different sections. And

the section that I would have liked to have gone into was labor law. I thought that would be interesting because . . . . I take it now I have to give you a little background. I had worked for the federal government, for the National Labor Relations Board, and then for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—those were both involved with labor law. So, the section that would have interested me was labor law.

But you always hear that in a corporation if you want to make money and move up, you gotta do antitrust work and corporate work. So—and George Shertzer gave me the option—other lawyers didn't get it—gave me the option of picking whatever section I wanted to be in. So, I picked the corporate section, which wasn't where my emotions led me, but it was this business of if you want to move up, you gotta work in corporate.

So, he put me in corporate, and I was there for a short time. And I remember speaking to people and, I said, "You know, I'm in corporate, but my heart is really in labor law."

So, people said to me, "Life is short. Why aren't you doing what you care about? You know, why are you doing this other thing?"

So, I said, "That's right." And I went to George and I said, "Could I change my mind ? I would like to work in labor law." And he said I could, and I switched to labor law.

Ms. Alpert: And, so, what again, then, what did you do?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, I handled cases for . . . . I'm trying to think now what did I do for GTE—I was there about 8 years. I know I worked on issues involving labor law. I remember one time I served as a lawyer in a mediation case. And I felt very

badly about that because I had no training in mediation, and I didn't feel I did a good job. But that was just my own conclusion. And I was up against a guy who was such a terrific mediation lawyer that I really felt horrible because I wasn't really qualified to take this guy on. But I did that one mediation case, and I can't really tell you what else I did. I am trying to remember. One time I went out and investigated a case, and I am not sure whether I did that for GTE or TRW. But for one of those corporations, I once went out and investigated a case: an African American man was an assistant personnel manager. And about 10 different women complained that he was sexually harassing them. And I was sent out to investigate that case either for GTE or for TRW—I can't remember which—so, I interviewed these 10 different women. They did not know each other. And they told the same story about this guy, that he threatened their jobs if they didn't sleep with him. And some of them were married women. And they were caught between a rock and a hard place. They even told their husbands because they needed the money. They couldn't afford to lose their jobs, but they also were married and didn't want to go to bed with this guy. So, 10 women told me versions of this story—10 women who did not know each other.

And, then, this African American guy was very friendly with a—these women were mostly white women that he came on to—and this woman was a white woman, she was very friendly with this black guy. And when people made these allegations against him, she defended him. And, then, he came on to her. So, that's when she made it public—filed a claim, I don't know what happened—that's how I came in to investigate it.



And I met with this guy and I said to him, "Sir, could you explain to me . . . ?  
By the way, he was engaged to be married, not to any of these women. I said,  
"Sir, can you explain to me why ten women who don't know each other tell me  
the same story about your propositioning them? How can you explain that?"  
And his answer was, "I don't know."

So, I reported this to the company, and what they ended up doing was they  
gave him \$4,000 and told him to leave. And that's what happened.

Ms. Alpert: Now, during this time did you stay involved in the women's movement?

Ms. Fuentes: Oh, yes.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: Once I was a founder of NOW, then I was a member of NOW, and I remained  
involved. In fact, thank you for reminding me of something, at GTE . . . .

Ms. Alpert: We're good.

Ms. Fuentes: At GTE,—I don't know that I formed this, I think I might have—I formed a  
group of women, a small group of maybe four or five of us. And we met to  
discuss things involving women or sex discrimination at GTE. And we felt we  
had to keep it secret.

And we did keep it secret. We did not feel comfortable telling anybody at the  
company that we were doing this. Well, we would meet for lunch and just  
discuss issues that were going on with us personally or at the company that  
were going on.

Ms. Alpert: And did you see sex discrimination there?

Ms. Fuentes: One thing—I don't want to call it sex discrimination—but one thing I saw  
which upset me a great deal—when the EEOC started enforcing Title VII for

women, and when it started issuing decisions, some of which I wrote, in favor of women's rights, one of them was that you could not terminate a woman who could do the job if she was working for you and she was pregnant. You couldn't fire her for that if she was able to do the job. You couldn't refuse to hire a woman because she told you she was pregnant.

And you had to give women—it issued guidelines on pregnancy and childbearing. These are a little complicated, I wrote them myself, but the idea came from the commission. But you had to provide the same kind of medical leave and benefits to women in connection with pregnancy and childbirth that you provided to employees generally who needed time off, either for sickness or for annual leave, depending if the woman was sick while she was pregnant. Pregnancy is not a sickness, but a woman could be disabled while she was pregnant, and, if so, she was entitled to the same things that other employees got who were temporarily disabled.

Well, GTE was not following the law that the EEOC had come up with regard to pregnancy. And it was not giving women benefits in connection with childbirth and pregnancy. And the guy who was responsible for that was a guy named John McKeefe, who was my boss in the labor law section of GTE. And he played hardball. And I remember once saying to a group of officials at GTE that the law has come down about this. You are throwing out money by fighting these cases all over the country when this is going to be the law of the land.

At that time, the EEOC had said it. The courts hadn't come down and affirmed it yet, which they did later on. I said, "You guys are just wasting money by

fighting all these legal cases all over the country.” And what they said to me, which really brought me up short—because when I was working at the EEOC, if I told somebody what the law was, as I made speeches or I told employers, when I told somebody what the law was, that’s what the law was. I mean, there was no . . . it wasn’t a subject for negotiation or discussion. At GTE, they told me, “We are very interested to hear your decision, your advice, we will take it under consideration. It will be one of various factors that we’ll think about, but we are going to keep going that route.”

They liked John McKeefe’s approach. John McKeefe, by the way, was a womanizer. He came on to secretaries and other people who worked for him. But he played hardball, and the officials at GTE liked that.

What was the bottom line? I was right, of course. The courts came down with all these decisions with regard to pregnancy and childbirth. And God knows how much money GTE lost by pursuing this policy which was behind the times. But you never heard anybody blame John McKeefe for following that policy. You never heard anybody blamed for following it. That’s the way they wanted to go, and that’s the way they went, even though it cost the company big bucks.

Ms. Alpert: It was just the way it was at the time.

Ms. Fuentes: Right. Right.

Ms. Alpert: All right. Let’s stop there for today.

Ms. Fuentes: Okay.

Ms. Alpert: And, again, thank you, Sonia. And we will reconvene next time.

ORAL HISTORY OF  
SONIA PRESSMAN FUENTES  
ON BEHALF OF WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LAW  
A PROJECT OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION  
SENIOR LAWYERS DIVISION

BY LIZ ALPERT  
FOURTH INTERVIEW  
DECEMBER 19, 2013

Ms. Alpert: This is Liz Alpert and it is December 19, 2013, and I am here with Sonia Pressman Fuentes, and we are talking about her amazing career in the legal community and otherwise. And again, welcome, Sonia. The last time that we talked you were talking about being called a "sex maniac." Do you want to explain that?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, the person who called me that was my boss, Charlie Duncan, the general counsel of the EEOC, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and he called me that because during the first year of the EEOC's administration of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it wasn't doing much to interpret and enforce the sex discrimination prohibitions of the act. And that was for two reasons, which I might have mentioned earlier, one was that the commission at that time had about one hundred permanent employees. Most of them came out of the Civil Rights Movement and they came there to enforce the provisions barring discrimination based on race or color in employment, and they didn't want the commission's time and money diverted to issues of sex discrimination. And as I probably also said earlier, the amendment to

add sex discrimination to the prohibitions of Title VII was only proposed in the latter part of the debates on the act by a southern segregationist congressman named Howard Smith who opposed the act. It hadn't really been thoroughly debated. It didn't come out of a movement like the rest of the act came out of the Civil Rights Movement. So, most of the people did not want the commission's time and money diverted to issues of sex discrimination.

And the second reason was that the sex discrimination provisions raised a host of questions of interpretation that the provisions against race and color did not raise. And no one at the commission really knew how to interpret those issues. And that was the second reason they didn't do much about it.

But, I had read the law and I saw that sex discrimination was a part of the law. So, that whenever an issue came up that the commission or people at the commission were debating, I would always raise the question of, What about sex discrimination? Because, otherwise, it would have been forgotten. And because I kept raising that, my boss took to calling me a "sex maniac."

Ms. Alpert: And what were some of those issues? At that time, people weren't really cognizant as much of sex discrimination in the first place, were they? I mean, that they just kind of accepted the way women were treated, let's say, in the workplace?

Ms. Fuentes: Absolutely. I just gave a talk last week to the Phi Beta Kappa

Association of Sarasota-Manatee, and I made that very point, that I came to this country in 1934, grew up here, and accepted the second-class status of women here, just as most other people did. That was just the way things were in this country.

There had been a movement for women's rights started at the Seneca Falls, New York Convention in 1848, and that really culminated when women got the vote in 1920. And, after 1920, there were groups of women and organizations who were fighting for women's rights—continued the fight for women's rights—after women got the vote. But they were considered an elite group. It was a small group; it was not a nationwide movement, by any means. Most people didn't even know about it. So, you are absolutely right that there had been no national movement to eliminate sex discrimination from the workplace or any other place before Title VII was passed.

And you have to go back a little. The year before, the Equal Pay Act was passed, which became effective in 1964, and that provided for nondiscrimination in pay based on sex for equal or substantially equal work. So, that came first. It was passed in 1963 and became effective 1964. Title VII was passed in 1964 and became effective in 1965. But it was a new field for this country.

Ms. Alpert:

For people listening to this that didn't live during those times, what were some of things that women . . . what were some of the things that were overt discrimination against women?

Ms. Fuentes: I always mention this in my speeches. And if I am talking to college students, young women, who are eighteen, nineteen, twenty, their mouths just drop open. Because I describe a world of which they have no knowledge, and they cannot believe that the United States was ever like that, and I am just describing a foreign situation to them.

But let me explain to you. By and large, men and women before the early sixties lived in two separate worlds. The man's job was to go out and make a living. The woman's job was to be in the home and to be a wife and a mother. The man, if he was married, really was not expected to play any role with regard to his family, his children, running the household—that was not his bailiwick. Similarly, the wife's bailiwick was not the big world outside her house.

It was also expected that when a woman got married, she would be a virgin. It was also expected that the man would take the initiative in dating and proposing marriage. The natural thing for a woman to do was to get married and have a family. If she did not get married, she was considered an “old maid,” which was a derogatory term and she was really relegated to the periphery of life. *[End of first audio file.]*

I don't need a question from you; I'm still answering that one.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: Tell me when to start.

Ms. Alpert: All right. Go.

Ms. Fuentes: Okay. There were, of course, women who worked and that was

acceptable, but there were certain jobs that were considered appropriate for women, and other jobs were considered appropriate for men. And, for women, what was appropriate could be an actress, a seamstress, a bookkeeper, a secretary, a clerk, a typist, a schoolteacher—these kinds of jobs were appropriate for women.

For men, an appropriate job would be a policeman, a principal of a school, a superintendent of a school, a general in the service, a President, a senator, a representative, the high-level jobs.

And, generally, if a woman did work, she worked until she got married.

But, if household finances required it, she might go on working even though she was married. But under no condition was she supposed to be earning more than her husband.

Now, that's the kind of bifurcated world we had, but there were some different dynamics at play in minority communities. For example, among African Americans, more women went to college than men, and women could often find jobs more easily than men in the African American community, albeit those would be jobs as domestic servants. So, that is the kind of world that we were living in when these laws came into play in the early Sixties.

Ms. Alpert: And weren't there some other things, such as ads in the newspapers for employment. . .

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. Oh, I can just . . . .

Ms. Alpert: for men and women and . . .



Ms. Fuentes:

Right. You touched on a very important issue. Part of the fact that our world was separated in two: one world for women, and one world for men. Part of that was—because you had such a world—that newspapers ran classified ads in sex-segregated advertising columns that were headed “Help Wanted-Male” or “Help Wanted-Female.” And these were really sex discriminatory in two ways: first, they were headed “Help Wanted-Male” or “Help Wanted-Female,” and, secondly, the content of the ad would also be sexually discriminating. For example, an employer might run an ad saying, “I am looking for a woman who is a good typist and a secretary.” Or, “I am looking for a man to be an engineer.”

When Title VII came along, it was obvious to people like me that you couldn't continue such ads. But the newspapers and the employers put up a big fight. Newspapers liked the fact that you had to pay double if you had a job that either a man or a woman could fill. There weren't a million of those, but there were some. But if you had such a job, you had to run the ad twice, in “Help Wanted-Male” and “Help Wanted-Female.” This brought in double revenue for the newspapers. So, they didn't want that changed. And the employers also liked to be able to express a preference both by advertising under “Help Wanted-Male” or “Female” and by putting “I am looking for a Girl Friday” or “I am looking for this or that.” So, this was a big battle in the early days of the EEOC, and the EEOC first came out, because it didn't want to offend the newspapers, I don't know what, it first came out with a ridiculous decision similar to

the ridiculous “Don’t tell, don’t ask.” policy in the military, and the EEOC said at first, “You can run such sex-segregated columns if you have a box on that page where the columns are saying, “We don’t really mean it.” That is my interpretation. What the box had to say was “Although we’ve got segregated columns, you can look for an ad in any column, this and that.” Well, it was ridiculous, of course, but that was the first policy.

But, later on, the EEOC and the courts ruled that such separate columns were unlawful and also expressing a preference for sex in the ad was also unlawful unless—this was the big thing in the early days, I don’t think it’s anything today.—the Act had an exception called the bona fide occupational qualification exception, which was called bfoq for the initials, and that was an exception to when you had to treat men and women equally.

The only real example we could come up with in the early days was—let’s say you were hiring for a wet nurse. You probably wouldn’t be covered by Title VII but let’s assume you were. If you were hiring for a wet nurse, sex was a bfoq for that job. And, therefore, you could say, “I am looking for a woman to be a wet nurse.”

Ms. Alpert: Right. And could you explain what a wet nurse was?

Ms. Fuentes: A wet nurse is somebody who nourishes somebody else’s child.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: Or, sperm donors. Supposing you were looking for a sperm donor. You

could also say, "I am looking for a man to be a sperm donor." Maybe, there are other examples, but there weren't many. But unless you came within that bfoq exception, you couldn't discriminate in the content of the ad or in the column, separate columns for the ads. That was a very big issue in the early days.

And another very big issue in the early days was flight cabin attendants. The airlines had a very interesting cockamamie history in this field. In the early days, they used to hire only women as flight cabin attendants, and they would put them in white nurses uniforms. The crazy idea behind that was that if a man was—and in those days mostly men flew—that if a man was flying in a plane, and he saw a nurse, what he thought was, "A nurse in a white uniform." He wouldn't be worried about crashing because a nurse was right there who would help him. That was the crazy philosophy behind that.

So, initially, the airlines hired stewardesses and put them in nurses' uniforms. And, they didn't hire men. The next phase was, they stopped hiring women and they hired men because they wanted them to carry the luggage. The third phase, which is the one where Title VII came into play, was that for domestic runs, they would hire only women; for international runs, they would hire only men. And the reason they did it was another cockamamie reason. They had this idea that if a man was going, let's say he lived in Sarasota, Florida, where we live, and he was going to look for a flight to Chicago. The theory was that when that man

was looking for a flight to Chicago, he was not looking for the plane that would get him there at the best time for his convenience. No, he would look to see which airline had the most attractive stewardesses, and that's the plane he would take. So, they wanted to hire only women.

Ms. Alpert: And how would they know which plane had the most attractive stewardesses?

Ms. Fuentes: Of course not. Of course not. I am just giving you examples.

Ms. Alpert: Yeah. I know. That's just . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: of the crazy world we lived in, which everyone accepted until the 1960s, or almost everyone. All right. So, the stewardesses early on brought cases, first, in New York State or New York City because they had a Fair Employment Practices Commission before the federal one. And, then, they filed immediately with Title VII because not only did the airlines hire only women as flight cabin attendants, but then they put onerous conditions on their jobs. They had to meet certain height and weight standards, and when they got to be very aged and were either thirty-two or thirty-five, they were grounded or terminated as stewardesses. This was beneficial for the airlines because they didn't have to pay them pensions because they couldn't stay long enough, so they didn't have to give them pensions, retirement benefits, and they didn't have to promote them and pay them a higher salary. So, the stewardesses were subject to being terminated on thirty-two or thirty-five or on getting married or, of course, on getting pregnant. So, this is what they complained about.

And the EEOC had a tough time with this. Not somebody like me because it was obvious that if you had half a brain that this made no sense because how can you say only women can work as flight cabin attendants in the United States but all of a sudden if the plane is going overseas they lose their qualifications and only men can do it? It couldn't hold up. But the airlines had terrific attorneys and they fought this, but they lost. And I had the big pleasure and privilege of writing the initial decision from the commission that found that those policies were unlawful.

Ms. Alpert: That's wonderful. So, can you recall any of the reasoning or rationale of that decision that you wrote.

Ms. Fuentes: Oh, I'd have to go back because—and look it up—I thought about it a lot because their contention was that we can—well, I guess, the reason—their contention was that Title VII doesn't apply because we only hire women and Title VII only applies when you discriminate between men and women. So, they said we don't discriminate; we only hire women nationally and men internationally, so there is no discrimination between men and women.

So, I don't remember but I am guessing the reason was that this is ridiculous. You are hiring men and women, men internationally, women locally, and you can't have conditions for the women that you don't have for the men. And you can't just hire women domestically and men internationally, but I don't want to say that's what the decision was. We'd have to look at it. But that's my guess.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. Okay. During that period of time also, and I don't know if this is something the EEOC dealt with, but wasn't there discrimination in terms of women serving on juries and certainly . . .

Ms. Fuentes: The EEOC only dealt with employment.

Ms. Alpert: With employment. Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: Only with employment. But what you are getting at is that when the EEOC and the Labor Department, which was then enforcing the Equal Pay Act (Later on, that enforcement was given to the EEOC.), but in the beginning, it was the Labor Department. Their jurisdiction was only employment. And, in fact, I used to say, sometimes almost humorously, that Title VII involves only what happens between nine and five and not after five o'clock. But what happened, which those of us who were feminist activists in those days didn't really expect but should have—perhaps if we had been more involved as students of history or social conditions—was that what happened in Title VII—the decisions of the EEOC and the courts and under the Equal Pay Act—spilled over into every aspect of life in America and spilled over into the rest of the world also. So you are correct, the EEOC had nothing to do with jury service or anything like that. They only dealt with employment and they only covered actions by employers, employment agencies, and labor unions. But that concept of equality for men and women naturally spilled over into everything. As I mentioned, I gave a talk last weekend and one of the things I mentioned, which people are aghast when they hear, one of

the ways in which women were discriminated against was that very often under criminal law women would get—sometimes the law provided for this—women would get longer prison sentences for the same act than men. Can you realize why?

Ms. Alpert: No.

Ms. Fuentes: Okay. Because the view was that women are nurturing creatures, people we put on a pedestal. They are the finer part of the human race and, therefore, if a woman commits a crime, she must be horrendous because women, by and large, are wonderful creatures. So, if a woman commits a crime, she must be really bad, and we have to punish her more.

Ms. Alpert: Under that rationale, I guess that would make sense. . . .

Ms. Fuentes: So, you had state laws, you had judges imposing harsher sentences on women.

Ms. Alpert: Well, didn't Title VII affect and you said it spilled out into other areas, even as far as, I think, physical education and sports . . .

Ms. Fuentes: No, that is Title IX. . .

Ms. Alpert: That's Title IX, okay. All right. So I've gotten those two confused.

Ms. Fuentes: Now let say a word about that. In fact, I am dealing with a case right now here in Sarasota involving a possible question of Title IX, and all week I have been calling the Justice Department and the Education Department. I am trying to get some information on Title IX, but Title VII became the law in July of 1965. Title IX—and it is Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—Title IX is Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: And it prohibits discrimination against anyone in the United States, any kind of discrimination, having to do with academia, and it goes through the first grade up through the university. Most people think of it in terms of athletic programs in that it requires the equal expenditures by colleges and universities, let's say, high schools, or whatever, equal expenditures for athletics for men and women. But that is just one little part. Well, I don't know, maybe it's not a little part, but it is just one part of Title IX. Title IX prohibits discrimination based on gender in academia.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. All right. So, I had my titles mixed up.

Ms. Fuentes: You are not unusual in that.

Ms. Alpert: But all of those things were occurring at this same time that you were, you know, at the EEOC that we just didn't realize . . .

Ms. Fuentes: No, because I left the EEOC in 1973. . . well, about that time. . .

Ms. Alpert: Right. But I mean the climate of the country . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. Correct. About that same time.

Ms. Alpert: there was discrimination in every aspect besides employment, in every aspect of society against women.

Ms. Fuentes: Right. Correct. Well, if you consider women to be second-class citizens, then they are going to be treated like that whatever they do. There isn't a thing you can mention where they wouldn't be treated differently because they were considered second-class citizens. Not the equals of men.

Ms. Alpert: Well, now, you discuss that the Equal Pay Act was signed into law then



with the Title VII, correct?

Ms. Fuentes: No, not at the same time, the year before.

Ms. Alpert: Okay, a year before, okay. So, when President Obama became President, one of the first things he did was sign into law the Lilly Ledbetter Act, which provided for Equal Pay.

Ms. Fuentes: Now, you have made a wonderful mistake which everybody makes . . .

Ms. Alpert: Okay. Good. Maybe we will get this clarified here.

Ms. Fuentes: And it really gets me upset because so many people go around saying Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Act and created equal pay in the United States. And it absolutely blows my mind that people could be so ignorant. Of course, this is my field and it is what I've been doing for fifty years. So I don't have a right to feel that way, but I, nonetheless, do feel that way. The Equal Pay Act was adopted in 1963 . . .

Ms. Alpert: Right. But it didn't happen . . .

Ms. Fuentes: And it became law in 1964. It had. And, actually, the Lilly Ledbetter Act involved Title VII. The Lilly Ledbetter Act involved the following wrinkle: a woman was working, I think for GE or General Motors. Lilly Ledbetter, I forget who her employer was. And she worked there maybe twenty years. And sometime after the twenty years, she learned that men doing the same job she was doing were earning more money than she was. She hadn't learned that before because her company didn't allow employees to talk about salary.

So, when she learned of it, she filed a claim, I think with Title VII, for back pay since the time that she was working there and men were earning more than she for the same work. And the court ruled against her because they said she should have filed that claim twenty years ago—when she didn't know about it. Which, of course, is asinine. But that was a loophole in the act. So, the Lilly Ledbetter Act does no more than say that you are entitled to back pay from the time the discrimination against you starts. You don't have to know about it, but you are entitled to back pay from the time the discrimination starts. That's all the Lilly Ledbetter Act did. It's a fine thing. We needed it, but to say that Obama by signing it brought equal pay into this country is unbelievable. And not true.

Ms. Alpert: Even though it was signed into law in the Sixties, the truth of the matter is that it really hadn't been as followed as it should have been—the fact that Lilly Ledbetter's employer paid men more than they paid her.

Ms. Fuentes: No, no. You're wrong on many counts.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: First of all, the Equal Pay Act was administered from the time it became effective, like Title VII was administered. The reason that the Lilly Ledbetter Act was needed was because that was a loophole in the act because it required the employee to file a charge when she doesn't know about it.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: It's not possible. Okay. So, that was a loophole in the act. That doesn't mean that the Equal Pay Act wasn't being enforced. It was being enforced. However, there is a glimmer of truth in what I think you were trying to say, and that was that the mere fact that you have a law on the books doesn't mean that society changes overnight. Laws are not self-enforcing. Let's say Title VII was passed and it took up ten pages, right? Once the law is passed, those ten pages do not get up, walk out of the Congress, and start enforcing the law. No, they are just pieces of paper. In order for the law to get enforced, a Liz Alpert, a Sonia Fuentes, a Joe Blow has to file a charge of discrimination, and an agency has to administer it and interpret it to come out with a decision. And then, it has to go to court. So, this is a very difficult, lengthy time-consuming process.

The fortunate thing is that Title VII also provides for "pattern and practice" cases, so you don't have to just allege that Liz Alpert was discriminated against. You can say Liz Alpert worked for the Colony Hotels and they

discriminated against Liz Alpert and every other woman like Liz Alpert. So, you could bring class actions. But, even with all that, even with all that, you are absolutely right. There is still plenty of discrimination. When, I forget what year it was, but let's say, back in the Fifties, I am not sure, at some point—I have the year some place, maybe in 1959—women used to make fifty-eight cents for every dollar that men made. The latest is that women are making seventy-seven cents for every dollar that men earn. Now, let me explain that a little bit. Some of that differentiation between seventy-seven cents and a dollar is caused by legitimate factors because this is considering all working woman versus all working men. Some of the women have lower level jobs; they don't have the education for a higher job. But statisticians look at that difference between seventy-seven cents and a dollar, and they can figure out what part is due to legitimate reasons and a certain part is left that is due to nothing but discrimination. So, it's still going on.

Ms. Alpert: All right.

Ms. Fuentes: But, listen, we've had laws against murder since the beginning of time. It hasn't stopped murders.

Ms. Alpert: That's true.

Ms. Fuentes: And this is the same. You've got to keep plugging away.

Ms. Alpert: Right. And, at the EEOC, that's what you were doing. Do you want to describe some of your frustrations that you had with trying to be the one that kept pointing out that there was sex discrimination?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, it was very frustrating until we formed NOW, and the reason it was frustrating is that I was, felt, very much alone in always raising the specter of sex discrimination. And the reasons for that were that there were a couple of commissioners—the EEOC had five commissioners—and two of them were also feminists: Aileen Hernandez and Dick Graham. And there was a third one even, Sam Jackson, an African American, who had some sympathies for black women, and so he had some sympathies for women, but he was primarily interested in African American men.

So, we had some commissioners who cared about sex discrimination, but I was just an attorney there. Although I was the first woman attorney in the Office of the General Counsel, but I was still just an attorney. I was, I think, thirty-nine years old at the time. I had no background whatsoever in labor law or equal employment. There hadn't been such a thing as equal employment, but I had no background in this field.

Now, there were some other women lawyers. One in particular occurs to me, Van Swift, who worked for Vice Chairman Luther Holcomb, who [Van Swift] I think also had feminist sympathies. But Van Swift was working for Luther Holcomb who cared as much about women's rights as you care about going through the ceiling here, and she wasn't about to stick her neck out. I didn't have any such concerns.

I wasn't worried ever about speaking out. I was never worried about losing my job. Generally, I wasn't worried about speaking out. I don't

know where this came from except I came from parents who would have always supported me if I needed it. So, I never had this question that I'll speak out and I'll lose my job and I'll be on the streets. It never occurred to me. So, I wasn't afraid of that.

But, until NOW was founded, I used to speak out. People heard me but they didn't pay any attention to me because I didn't have any power.

Charlie Duncan, the general counsel, was educable on the issue of women's rights, and it didn't take long at all for him to come over to my way of thinking. But Dick Berg, the deputy general counsel, believed a woman's place was in the home. Herman Edelsberg, the executive director, was totally opposed to women's rights. Luther Holcomb was totally opposed to women's rights. The country hadn't yet been educated in that area.

So, I remember, I mentioned in my book, I used to go home, and I had been discussing with these men—I had been discussing the issues with these men—but they had the power and I had zilch.

I remember walking home from the office with tears running down my eyes because I didn't know how I got into this position. How did I get into this position that I was arguing and fighting with these men who had power when I didn't have power? Nobody had elected me to represent women. I just didn't know why I was in this spot.

Ms. Alpert:

And did you understand why even your motivation for constantly taking this on rather than you know, the other woman who said, "You know, I

don't want to stick my neck out," even though . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: She didn't say that. I'm telling you that was her attitude.

Ms. Alpert: Right. Right. But, I guess what I am saying is even though you knew you weren't going to lose your job over it . . .

Ms. Fuentes: No, I didn't know that. I didn't care.

Ms. Alpert: And you didn't care. But you also didn't necessarily need the aggravation, you know, so why bother? What do you think brought you to having sort of this fighter mentality that obviously you still have?

Ms. Fuentes: I gave a talk last week to Phi Beta Kappa and I mentioned that. And a lot of times you are giving talks, you're drafting talks, and you gain insights that you didn't have before—although I really knew this before but I hadn't put it together.

I think two things: (1) I was a Jew who had to leave Germany with my parents and brother or I would have been killed. And I was five years old when this happened. So, I became sensitized to what discrimination does because it affected me directly, and my family, and all the other Jews. And, the second thing that happened is that when I was about ten and we were living in the Catskill Mountains of New York, I was diagnosed with childhood asthma. I was very ill and the doctor in the Catskills that we used at that time didn't know how to help me. And he suggested to my parents that they take me to a warmer climate, that maybe I'd feel better there. So, my parents started taking me and going to Miami Beach for the winters. And they would drive the car. I mean, we would go by car.

So, we would pass through Georgia and South Carolina and Miami Beach and wherever we went, I would see the benches were marked "Colored" and "White"; the buses, African Americans had to sit in the back; the water fountains were "Colored" and "White"; the restrooms were "Colored" and "White." And I would see racist headlines in the newspapers. This offended me tremendously. I knew it was wrong. I cannot tell you where that knowledge came from, but it was terribly offensive to me.

Ms. Alpert: Especially at ten years old that that would be . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: And beyond that, because we kept going to Miami Beach every year. It turned out that I was allergic to certain things. My mother took me to an allergist. Then, she took me off those things, and then she put me back on them, and I never had the problem again.

But we kept going to Miami Beach every year for the winter.

Ms. Alpert: So tell me about then the events that caused you to be involved with the organization and creation of the National Organization of Women.

Ms. Fuentes: For Women

Ms. Alpert: For Women.

Ms. Fuentes: And that is a very big difference.

Ms. Alpert: That's true.



Ms. Fuentes: And it was a conscious decision on the part of the organization when we were forming it because the initial name suggested was the National Organization of Women. And many people make that mistake to this day as you just did. And the reason we consciously chose “for” women is that we wanted to make it clear that we were open to men. And we had men as founders and we have always had men as members and we wholeheartedly believe in working with men. So, that’s why calling it the National Organization for Women is very important.

Ms. Alpert: You can see that.

Ms. Fuentes: The way that I got involved, I was working at the EEOC. I had read Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published in 1963.

Ms. Alpert: And what was the, again for the people listening to this that really aren’t familiar with Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*, and what that was. What was the premise of that book?

Ms. Fuentes: Betty Friedan was a writer and that book was about the fact that no one is talking about the fact that women are getting married, and moving into the suburbs, and having children, and feeling frustrated, and not developing their potential, and that this is a big secret throughout the United States that nobody talks about, that these suburban housewives are not happy. And they are not happy because a person isn’t fulfilled just by raising children.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. All right.

Ms. Fuentes: So, I had read that book. And I think I had also read Simone de

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

Ms. Alpert: Which was?

Ms. Fuentes: I can't tell you what that was about, but it was another book along the feminine—women's rights. But I don't remember what it was about.

Ms. Alpert: Similar kind of book.

Ms. Fuentes: That was a precursor to *The Feminine Mystique*. So, I am in the office one day, and Betty Friedan walks in, and she was there to interview Charlie Duncan and the deputy, Dick Berg. She thought she was going to write a follow-up to *The Feminine Mystique* about all the progress that she thought women had made in the three years, or whatever it was, since *The Feminine Mystique* was published. So, she came there to interview my boss and his deputy. But she saw me in the office—a woman—so, she came over to me, and she had this way of talking where she'd say "What's going on here? Whata, whata. What's really happening? What's going on?"

And I listened to her, and I said to myself—well, this was one time I *was* worried about my job. And I said to myself, "If I tell this woman what's going on here, I'm going to lose my job."

So, I said to her, "Everything's fine here." So, then she went on and did whatever she did.

And a couple of weeks later, I think it was, she came back again. And she saw me again, and she asked me again, "What's going on here?" So, she came, that second time that she came, I was feeling particularly

vulnerable on the issue of women's rights. Maybe "vulnerable" isn't the right word, frustrated.

So, I invited her into the privacy of my office, and I told her, and I had tears in my eyes, and I told her that what this country needed was an organization to fight for women like the NAACP fought for its constituents (whom I probably would have called Negroes in those days). And I said that to her. So, that would have been sometime in the latter part of 1965 or the beginning of 1966.

So, then in June of 1966, there was a meeting in Washington, D.C., of the Third Annual Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women. Different states had commissions on the status of women, and they were having this conference. And it was under the aegis of the Department of Labor.

So, at that conference, the women wanted to pass some resolutions. They were afraid that Dick Graham, whom I mentioned to you, a commissioner, was not going to be reappointed because he was a feminist. Dick told me that really wasn't true. But the women thought so. And they also wanted to pass a resolution for the strong enforcement for women of Title VII.

So, they were told by the people running this Third Conference of the Commissions on the Status of Women that they didn't have the authority to pass resolutions. Now, I think they didn't understand. They got very upset when they were told that they didn't have the authority to adopt

resolutions, but actually there was a lawful and sensible reason for that. And the rule is that one federal agency can't adopt resolutions telling another federal agency what to do. And this conference was under the aegis—or maybe I'm mispronouncing it, the word is “a-e-g-i-s”—under the aegis of the Labor Department. So, people having a conference under the Labor Department couldn't pass resolutions telling the EEOC what to do. But the women didn't know that. So, that night they got together in Betty Friedan's hotel room, and they all discussed how upset they were about the fact that they couldn't pass resolutions.

And the next day at lunch, Betty Friedan took out a paper napkin and said, “We are forming an organization to bring women into the mainstream of American life, now, on an equal basis with men.” And everybody who wanted to join put in five dollars, and twenty-eight women—there were women only at that meeting—at that session, twenty-eight women put in five dollars, and those were the first founders of NOW.

On Halloween weekend of October 1966—and some of the same people came and some other people came. I was at that second meeting, and I was involved at that meeting. We drafted skeletal bylaws and a Statement of Purpose. And another twenty-one men and women became founders at that meeting, so you had a total of forty-nine. And NOW was formed.

Ms. Alpert:

Did you stay involved? What did you do?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, I stayed involved. That was in 1966. We are now at the end of 2013, and I am still involved. You don't get into a cause like that, I think, and get out.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: So, I was involved all along. Now, NOW was very active right from the beginning, fighting for women's rights. It picketed the White House and the EEOC headquarters. It brought lawsuits. It got publicity. Meanwhile, there was another thing happening, which I never put together until I gave this talk last week. I told you about the disinterest of the people at the EEOC in sex discrimination cases.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: But, to their astonishment, in the first fiscal year of the commission's operations, thirty-seven percent of the claims filed alleged sex discrimination. Now, you have to remember that the Act prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. You had those various bases. Thirty-seven percent alleged gender discrimination. Wow! So, because of that percentage of sex discrimination charges and because of the actions of NOW, the EEOC began to turn around and began to have hearings on the sex discrimination issues, and began to issue decisions, and began to enforce that part of the act like it enforced the rest of the act.

Ms. Alpert: Well, I would guess that they wouldn't have a choice if they are getting these sex discrimination complaints. They have to process them.

Ms. Fuentes: Right. Correct.

Ms. Alpert: They have to then start working through some of these things. Okay. So, then continue, I guess, with your role in all of that there, and then I know at some point you moved on.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, I stayed with the commission—and I joined it on October 4, 1965—and I stayed there until June 18, 1973. And during that time, somewhere along the line, I became part of an informal network of men and women who cared about women's rights. And some of the people in that—and these were people in mid-level positions like me in the federal government. Unless you were in the women's rights movement, you never heard of these people. Among those people were Morag Simchak of the Labor Department, Caruthers Berger of the Labor Department, Phineas Indritz, a man who worked—I think he worked—for veterans. I think he was in the Veterans Administration. (He also wrote speeches for congresspersons like Martha Griffiths. She was a big proponent of women's rights in the Congress; as far as I am concerned, the only one. And he used to write her speeches.) Mary Eastwood in the Justice Department and Catherine East, who I think was with the Citizens' Advisory Committee on the Status of Women and the Citizens' Advisory Council—there were a couple of organizations like that. So we. . . . Let's say there were. . . . I don't know if I just mentioned—six or eight of us, and also a woman named Marguerite Rawalt, who was not in the federal government but had been. I think she had been in the federal

government and had various positions. She was a very prominent woman attorney.

So, we used to talk amongst each other, on the telephone or in person, and I would share information on cases involving sex discrimination that came across my desk, coming down the pike, and Marguerite Rawalt developed a cadre of private practice attorneys who would take those cases to court.

Now, under Title VII, you didn't have to take a case to court. You filed it with the EEOC and the EEOC investigated it. Well, in the beginning, the EEOC didn't have any enforcement action. So, the EEOC only had the power in the early days to try to conciliate. If it couldn't conciliate, its power was finished, except it could send to the Department of Justice "pattern or practice" cases.

And the Justice Department might bring a "pattern or practice" case. So.

....

Ms. Alpert: Can you explain what a "pattern or practice" case is?

Ms. Fuentes: It's a class action. It's something that the employer didn't only discriminate against Liz Alper; he discriminated against all the lawyers who worked for him or all the secretaries who worked for him. So, you didn't just allege discrimination against an individual. You said this employer discriminates against all his secretaries or all his women welders or— that's a "pattern or practice."

And if you get a decision or verdict in that, you've got the whole

company that you can change, rather than just one person. So, I forgot what I was saying though.

Ms. Alpert: That, that, that . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Oh, what I was doing. All right. So, I was telling about these cases. And Marguerite Rawalt developed a cadre of private practice people who would take. . . .

Now, let's say a woman filed. . . . After you file the charge of discrimination—you first have to file it with the state. If you didn't file it first with the state, the federal government would send it to the state. There were certain time periods. But then there was a period of sixty days within which the EEOC could enforce the case . . . could investigate and decide the case. But, even then, it just had conciliation power. (Later on, in 1972, it got enforcement powers.) But, after those sixty days, if you didn't want to wait around for what could be years till the EEOC did something, you had the right to get a private attorney and go to court yourself. And Marguerite Rawalt developed a cadre of lawyers who would take those cases.

Ms. Alpert: Okay.

Ms. Fuentes: So that's one of the things.

Ms. Alpert: So they could go to court while it was still pending under the EEOC?

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. That's correct. After sixty days, they could go to court. The other thing that I was involved in was that I was seeing what was going on at the EEOC, of course, and then I would meet. . . . Mary



Eastwood had an apartment in Southeast Washington, and I would meet in that apartment with Mary and Caruthers Berger and with Phineas Indritz, and I would tell them what the EEOC was doing that I felt wasn't right for women. And I would come in and I would say, "This week, the EEOC made this decision or they did this and this." Then, we would draft a letter from NOW to the EEOC saying, "How come you are doing this? How come you are not doing the other?" Sign it 'NOW,' send it to the EEOC. We never figured out how come the EEOC didn't say, "How do they know what we were doing in our meetings?" But it never came up.

Ms. Alpert: Which is pretty funny. I mean, that's pretty unusual.

Ms. Fuentes: I know. Also, not proper. I wasn't supposed to do that. But, I was so involved in women's rights that I never gave that a thought. So, we got away with that. We did that.

So, then, however, what happened. . . . the reason I left the EEOC was that the chairman at that time was a guy, an African American guy named Bill Brown. And what was happening at the EEOC was that white people were no longer getting promoted. But African American people were getting promoted. And this was happening with me, and I could see it.

And I went up and asked the chairman why he was doing that and he said, "I can't tell you the answer." So, I knew I had to leave. Basically, what happened is, first of all, I was head of one section there by that time.

And an African American man was head of another section. And that African American lawyer was known for one thing: he slept all day at his desk. That's what he was known for. And they were going to combine my section and his and give him the leadership of the section. So that's when I went up to Bill Brown and I said, "Why are you doing this?" And he said, "I can't answer you."

So, then, even *they* couldn't do that. So, instead of combining the two sections and making him the head of it, they said they were going to bring over an African American woman from the Justice Department named Issie Jenkins, who was a fine attorney, but knew nothing about Title VII. And they asked me to please teach her Title VII so that she could have the job that properly belonged to me. Well, of course, I wasn't going to do that. So, I refused. I said, "I am not going to do that. I will get myself another job." And, so then, I got myself another job.

Ms. Alpert: All right. Where did you go next?

Ms. Fuentes: I went with a company called the GTE Service Corporation in Stamford, Connecticut. I was the highest-paid woman in that headquarters office. And I went to work. . . . First, they just had a Legal Department and then they switched it into corporate work and labor law work. And I first chose corporate work because people told me that's where the money was. But I wasn't happy with that, and I asked my boss, who was very, very nice—his name was George Shertzer—he was a liberal man—an anomaly in that corporation.

GTE was the second-largest telephone company in the United States at that time, after AT&T. And I asked him to switch me to labor law, and he did. So, I did labor law work there.

Ms. Alpert: Which was basically your background, which is what you knew.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, I didn't have any labor law background educationally, but I had worked for the National Labor Relations Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, so I had a background work-wise in labor law.

Ms. Alpert: Right. Right. So that was your experience, okay. And after being so involved at the EEOC and with NOW, how did it seem to you to now be in the corporate world and in a whole different type of job?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, it wasn't easy and I'll tell you why. When I was at the EEOC—I started in 1965 going around the country giving speeches and telling people what Title VII meant. I am still doing that fifty years later. But that's when I started doing it. And when I was doing it, I said to them, "I am talking to you about a federal law and a federal law requires this, that, and the other." There was nothing to discuss there. I mean, this is a law and you have to follow it. When I went to the corporation, they, for example, at that time were fighting Title VII's provisions with regard to pregnancy. And they were going in the courts and fighting it and everything. And I said to them, "You are going to lose this. You are wasting the corporation's money. This is the law. It is going to be interpreted this way by the courts. You are wasting time."

And their answer to me was, “We are happy to hear your point of view, and we will take it into consideration like we take everything else into consideration.”

Well, that was a shock to me because I wasn’t used to talking about the law as something people take into consideration. A law is something that you have to follow. The corporation didn’t feel that way. The interesting thing was that the man who fought all these battles against pregnancy—I can’t even remember his whole name now—John McKeefe was his name. He was my boss. He was a real macho type guy. He was a good lawyer. He was a macho type guy. And he had a relationship, although he was married, with the secretary who worked for him, and everybody knew it.

But when he went around the country fighting these pregnancy cases, the top officials loved it because he was acting macho and fighting for them. He was costing them millions of dollars. I tried to save that money, but who was I? Just a woman. So, they followed him. He cost them millions of dollars. Nonetheless, that’s the route they took.

So, it was a shock for me because I was not used to telling people what the law was as if I was telling them that you could buy a yellow wool coat. To them, that was just a factor. But, of course, later they had to change all their policies. They lost all those cases and that kind of thing. Another thing I did there was, and this just seemed to happen, I formed an informal group of women, also in mid-level positions, but we never

told anybody about it. And we met, and we had lunch, and we shared information, and that kind of thing.

Ms. Alpert: And did you feel like that you were now experiencing some of that same discrimination being in the corporate world that you had been fighting in the EEOC?

Ms. Fuentes: I don't know that I would put it that way, but it was a different world. And I felt it more with the next corporation that I went to.

Ms. Alpert: Okay, and that was where?

Ms. Fuentes: Cause what happened, at one point I was having lunch with John McKeefe and some other people, and I bluntly spoke up about what John McKeefe was doing. And, from then on, I was dead there. So, I had to get myself another job.

And I got what sounded like a fine job with a corporation called TRW that was based in Cleveland, Ohio. They wanted to hire me—I didn't know this.—because they wanted it to look like they were doing something about EEO and women's rights. And I already had a reputation in that field. They didn't really want to do anything. I didn't know that until later. They wanted to look like they were doing something. So, they hired me and I went to work for them. And I was in charge.

Ms. Alpert: In charge of. . . what did they hire you to do?

Ms. Fuentes: Equal employment opportunity and affirmative action.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. For the corporation.

Ms. Fuentes:

Although there were people above me in the corporation. I was also the highest-paid woman there. But there were people above me with other titles. They were still above me, but I was in charge of equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. So, at one point. . . .

Well, also, one of the things I tried to do there—but there I tried to do it openly—I tried to form an organization of professional women at TRW headquarters. And my boss, Bob McCarty, called me in and told me I couldn't do that. So, I didn't form that organization.

Another thing that happened there—like the first day that I was there—my boss, Bob McCarty, took me around to introduce me to the different department heads. And one department head openly said to me “Listen,” he said, “when I am looking to hire somebody who is going to work under me, I want somebody that shares my opinions because he is going to be my lieutenant, let's say, or my vice president. I want him to like the football teams the way I like, and this, and that, and everything so he can then explain what I want to other people.” He said, “If I have to interview and hire women equally with men for the job, I might be able to find a woman but I'd have to interview ninety-nine of them before I found one.” He said “If I interview men for this job, the first and second ones will have the qualifications. So, don't you agree” he said to me, “that it doesn't make sense for me to treat women equally?”

That was on one of my first days there and I said, “I don't agree with you.” But he was head of a division and who was I?

So, then what happened was there was a planning conference in Florida someplace and I was at that planning conference. The first problem I had was the men stayed up all night playing poker, and I wasn't about to do that.

Then, I ran into a problem—there were men and women at that planning conference; let's say there were five women at this meeting—that there was a meeting and there were five women there—and a man got up who was a V.P. in the Automotive Division. TRW started by bringing various divisions together. One was Automotive, which was in Cleveland, Ohio; one was Electronics and Defense, which was out on the West Coast; and another one that was very well known was TRW Credit Reporting. So, it had those three different things. So, Automotive was a big part of it. So, so through this meeting, a vice president from Automotive was talking. And kept addressing the group as "Gentlemen." So, I waited for a break when I thought nobody was watching and I went up to him and I said, "Sir, you know there are about five women here and you keep addressing the audience as 'Gentlemen' " and he said "Oh, I am so glad you told me. I am not going to do that anymore." Then the break was over, the meeting resumed and he kept referring to everybody as "Gentlemen." Unbelievable. So, the meeting ended. And I went to work on Monday, and my boss called me in the office and he said, "What do you mean by talking to the vice president of Automotive in front of everybody the way you did?" Evidently, somebody had seen it and somebody had told him

or he himself had reported it. And he says he is going to send me away for sensitivity training because I need to be sensitized.

Ms. Alpert: He was going to send your boss away for sensitivity training or you? Oh, okay.

Ms. Fuentes: Because I had the effrontery to talk to that man during a break and tell him not to address men and women as "Gentlemen." So, I needed sensitivity training. So, they sent me to La Jolla, California, for a week of sensitivity training. I came back, and then what happened was that I was asked to prepare a five-minute video presentation for the president of the company and the CEO; those were two different people, on what was happening with EEO and Affirmative Action at the company. And I was supposed to prepare this. Fine. So then, ever since I'd gone to work there, which was, I started there the end of eighty-one, beginning of eighty-two—1982. From the minute I worked there, I was always told that the West Coast operation is a leader in EEO—in moving up its minorities. And it had the statistics to prove it and that that was always what was shown and other parts of the company were told, "That part is doing well," and so on. So, when I was told to prepare this five-minute video I started to research the West Coast minority numbers and I found an amazing thing: what the West Coast did was it lumped all the minorities together: blacks, Asians, whatever, but if you took them apart, you found that the only progress ever made there was in promoting Asians. African Americans had the same percentage in jobs and in



higher jobs than they had ever had. All the progress came from Asians and it was masked by mixing it up, putting them together with the blacks and everything, so then you could say, "We are doing good for our minorities."

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: So I discovered this one day and I thought "Wow! I really found something." So I came running into my boss, Bob McCarty's office and I said "Bob, look what I just found." Show you how naive I was I thought he was going to be excited with me. And I've never forgotten his answer: He said to me. "You are not going to hang that on the West Coast." I said "Hang that?" And I didn't understand. I thought he'd be as excited about this as I was. But he didn't want it to come out. So a couple of days later . . . *[Phone rings.] [End of second audio file.]* Okay. So, a few days later Bob asked me to have lunch with him. And we sit down for lunch and he says to me "You know, the Blacks are not like the Jews. The Jews have organizations and they help each other, but the blacks don't do that. The Jews are a wonderful people." I said "Bob, if you are trying to get me to change my mind about discrimination against African Americans by praising Jews, it's not going to work." First of all, that's not going to work. And, secondly, it's not true. Blacks have all kinds of organizations: the Urban League, the NAACP, they have all kinds of organizations that help themselves. And I forget whether he said something else, but that was what I remember. And a couple of days

after that, I was called in and Bob was there and a woman who was head of Personnel was there, and I think another person was there, and I was fired. And told to be out of there in two weeks. Well, I was stunned because I had uprooted my whole life. I had left— at that time it was Stamford, Connecticut—I never expected to live in the Midwestern United States. I uprooted my whole life. I had a daughter and made a new life for myself in Cleveland, and now I was being fired. So, I spent that weekend going to three people in Cleveland who were knowledgeable, and I asked them what to do because I could have easily filed a charge of sex discrimination against them; both for what they were doing to me and for what they did to women there. I didn't know whether to do that or what to do. And the advice I got was "Don't do that because you will ruin your career." So, what I decided to do and what I was advised to do was to hire a lawyer and make the best deal I could with TRW. Another interesting thing I found— somewhere down the line, I got a document, I think from a guy who was a labor lawyer there, as to the reason I was being fired. And the reason was for the "aggressive pursuit of the duties" of my job.

Ms. Alpert: Really? Really?

Ms. Fuentes: So, I hired—got this wonderful lawyer. I had friends there, Ann and Alvin Schorr. Alvin Schorr is a brother to Dan Schorr, the famous S-c-h-o-r-r, the famous television/radio newscaster, Daniel Schorr. Very well known. Alvin had been for many years dean of the School of Social

Work at NYU. And Ann also did research and things like that. They were good friends of mine. And they introduced me to this Robert Lewis, a lawyer, who represented me. And one of the things he said to me was that “We will never accuse them of discrimination. We will never use that word. Because if we threaten them, they will say ‘Go ahead, do your worst.’ “ He said, “We will never do that.” I found that when I got the job there was an exchange of letters between me and them. And in one of their letters they promised me that I would have a job either forever or for four years at least. It was written in black and white. This was part of their offer to me. So we went on the basis of that letter—that by firing me they were breaching . . .

Ms. Alpert: that contract.

Ms. Fuentes: that contract. And Bob was so wonderful. He taught me so many things that I never forgot. One of them was, “Keep your eye on the ball.” Like I would mention things that were happening and this or that and he kept saying “keep your eye on the ball. This isn’t what we are fighting for.” So, we had a number of meetings with them; discrimination was *never* mentioned. And I ended up getting—I didn’t have to leave my office in two weeks, but I had plenty of time to get out of there. I had six months that I stayed there, six months of assistance. I got a typewriter; I could get help with looking for a job; I cleared out whenever I wanted to; and I negotiated for a good reference, which still wasn’t good and my boss who hired me later on told me he knew something was wrong, you know,

because if you like somebody, you are effusive about them.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: And they didn't say anything bad about me, but he could tell something was wrong.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: But he negotiated everything. And I think I got—I also got severance pay; I remember getting something like a year's salary. So, he worked out a good deal for me, Bob Lewis.

Ms. Alpert: He did. All right. Is that a good place to stop, I think for today?

ORAL HISTORY OF  
SONIA PRESSMAN FUENTES  
ON BEHALF OF WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LAW,  
A PROJECT OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION,  
SENIOR LAWYERS DIVISION  
BY LIZ ALPERT

FIFTH INTERVIEW  
JANUARY 31, 2014

Ms. Alpert: This is Liz Alpert, and I am here with Sonia Pressman Fuentes, and this is another portion of our continuing interview about her trailblazing as a feminist and first female attorney at the EEOC . . .

Ms. Fuentes: In the General Counsel's Office.

Ms. Alpert: In the General Counsel's Office. And today is January 31<sup>st</sup> of 2014, and again, Sonia, welcome. And the last time we talked, you had just left your corporate job at TRW and negotiated a deal with them. Tell us what happened next.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, then I went into a very interesting and also, perhaps—I don't remember—difficult period. Cause I think when this happened would have been about 1984, and at that time I was fifty-six-years-old. I had a young daughter to support and had just lost my job. So, I began job-hunting. And people said all kinds of things to me that were not terribly encouraging or helpful—at least, they weren't to me. People told me to go to Washington—to move back to Washington, and that it would be better for me to find a job there rather than looking for a job in Cleveland. I wanted to go back to Washington, but I was planning to look for a job in Washington while I was living in

Cleveland. I didn't want to take the gamble of returning to Washington without a job. So, that was one suggestion people made to me, and I didn't accept it. And, then, people said that I should go into business for myself. And at the age of fifty-six, I had no idea about going into business and didn't do that. I had been a secretary before I became a lawyer; some people told me to look for a secretarial job. But I didn't do that. So, I basically don't recall what I did. I guess I told some people, and I looked at the ads. But then I let my housekeeper go because I didn't need a housekeeper since I wasn't working. And I became more active in the Jewish Secular Community, an organization to which I belonged in Cleveland. And this was a time where I learned a very important thing about myself that has never left me since then. Oh—and another thing—people asked me what I would do, you know, if I couldn't find a job and my money ran out or something, and I said, "I don't know; I guess I'll shoot myself." But one man told me something that was helpful. He was also job- hunting. And he said that he could always ask his father for money if he ran out of money, and that made me realize that I could always ask my brother for money if I ran out of money. The chances of my running out of money were slim, but the chances of my running out of liquid money—I had investments . . . . The chances of my running out of liquid money was a possibility. So, this gave me a good idea. But it had a very important lesson for me, which has never left me. I had always thought that I had no skills or abilities other than being a good attorney—I knew I was a good attorney. And I thought of myself as an attorney; I identified myself as

an attorney; and I thought I had nothing else to offer but that. And so, when I was out of work for this year-and-a-quarter, I suggested to the Jewish Secular Community that we put on some kind of a play about—I have a copy of it—which I wrote and put together. It wasn't really a play; it was a set of sketches, all of which had to do with Judaism in one form or another. And I also did a reading in that play. And we performed it, and, after the play, a woman who had been in the audience came up to me and said, "You are a woman of many talents." I never forgot that because I thought of myself as a woman of one talent. And she said to me, "You are a woman of many talents." And that has stayed with me; it has buoyed me up, and it has given me the courage to do different things than I did in the past and to go out of my comfort zone at times. So, I looked for a job for a year- and-a-quarter, and I don't think I got a single bite. And, at one point, I stopped answering the ads. I stopped looking at the ads in *The New York Times* and so on because it wasn't producing anything. I don't know if I was looking in the *Times* or the local newspaper; wherever I was looking, it wasn't producing anything. So, I had a friend at TRW, Diane Shelby, who was a lawyer in the Legal Department of TRW. And she had also lost her job. And she was also looking for a job. So, one day she came to see me and she pointed out this job that was in the paper for—I don't know what it was—for HUD, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in Washington, D.C. So, I thought she was telling me that here was a job I could apply for. She told me later on that she was applying for that job. And did apply for that job. I had no idea of that. If I had known that, I

never would have applied for the job because I am not somebody that would take a job away from someone else. But I thought she was just telling me about it. So, I applied for that job and then I got a response from this man named Jeff Lischer, who was the, I think, Assistant General Counsel and for whom I would be working if I got the job. And I think he told me that I was one of three, I think, being considered. Maybe at one point I was one of ten; then he told me I was one of three. And then he asked me—I am trying to think of the General Counsel's name, Ed something, I can't think of it now; I have it in my records, a very fine man. And he said the General Counsel would like me to come in for a personal interview. And I said to him, "Are you paying for this trip? Is HUD paying for this trip?" And he said, "No." And then I said, "Well, then I am not coming in." Well, in retrospect, how stupid was that decision? Here I had been looking for a job for a year-and-a-quarter; this was the first nibble I had; I could certainly afford a trip to Washington; I don't know, that's just the way I am. If you want me to go do something for you, or at least it looked to me like you—and when you weren't going to pay for it, I wasn't going to go. So, I said, "I'm not going." And then he told me I got the job. So, a friend of mine—and only later did Diane Shelby say that she had applied for it. I was really struck by that. She subsequently got another job and she did fine. She also returned to Washington. She is living in the Washington area now, retired. She wanted to go, I think, into the Foreign Service and that is what she got. So, I was thinking of taking that job a little time in the future, giving myself time to move and all that stuff, but I



had a friend in Washington, Betty Murphy, who at one time was, I think, chairperson of the National Labor Relations Board, a Republican. Oh, and she had also said to me while this was going on—she knew I was looking for a job, and she told me that if I come out as a Democrat for Reagan, or if I sign an ad, “Democrats for Reagan,” that she could help me get a job. I refused to do that. And it left me with a—she had been matron of honor at my wedding—but it left me with a negative opinion about her because she would only help me if I came out for Reagan. I turned that down. That, I would have never considered doing. I would have to be on bread and water or something, and even then I could never do it. So, Betty Murphy, nonetheless, told me that I better go right away to that job because a government freeze was coming down the line, and I had better start right away. So, I wrote back to Jeff Lischer, and he told me I could start right away. So, I had to go find a place to live, and I first lived for six months with a friend of mine named “Bunny” Sandler. I bought a townhouse in Potomac, Maryland, but it was going to take like six months to build. So, “Bunny” very kindly invited me to stay with her for six months. And I think I came the end of eighty-five—I’ve got my years right, yeah, yeah. And my daughter—meanwhile, for those six months or whatever it was—didn’t want to change schools, so I arranged with a friend, Judy—can’t think of her last name at the moment—who took. . . . Judy had a daughter in school with my daughter, Zia, and Zia stayed with that friend and her daughter so she could finish up the school year in Cleveland. And I would go see her on weekends or she would come to me on weekends. So, I came to Washington

to work for the General Counsel's Office at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Oh, and let me say something else. A peculiar thing that happened was the very next day after I accepted the offer from HUD, I got a call from a private law firm in Dallas, Texas offering me a job. And I turned it down because I had already accepted the job with HUD. Had that timing been reversed, I would probably have taken that job in Dallas.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. All right. I've got a couple of things come to mind as you are talking there.

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah?

Ms. Alpert: There's a feeling even now that there is age discrimination and certainly still some gender discrimination . . .

Ms. Fuentes: Some? Plenty! And also plenty of age discrimination.

Ms. Alpert: and plenty of age discrimination still going on.

Ms. Fuentes: Oh, I forget to say. I am going to interrupt you. Otherwise, I'll forget that when I lost that job at TRW, a good many people said to me, "Forget it. You are fifty-six-years-old. Nobody is going to hire you."

Ms. Alpert: Well, that's young. That's kind of where I was leaning because it had to have been even worse at the time you were looking for a job—you said like mid-eighties?

Ms. Fuentes: Eighty-four, eighty-five. Even worse, I don't know; I can't answer the question. I can only tell you at that point what happened to me—that it took me a year- and-a-quarter. I can't say it was because of my age; I have no idea what it was. Then, I got a job. But a good many people said, "Forget it,"

either become a secretary, go into business on your own, or whatever, nobody is going to hire a fifty-six-year-old woman. And people said that to me. But I also never gave any consideration to those comments because I felt I was fifty-six; I had a daughter who was—well let's say she was born in seventy-two—so, in 1985 she would have been what, thirteen?

Ms. Alpert: Yes.

Ms. Fuentes: So, I had a daughter to support and myself to support. And the idea of giving up or not finding a job was not an option. I knew that I had to find a job. Now, let me also say that I have never in my life been in dire financial circumstances. So, I had some money, investments that I had earned; some, my parents had left me. I had a brother if I needed help. So, I have never in my life been in financial distress. In fact, just last week—to give you an idea of the different worlds people are in—my cleaning woman was talking about going to the bank to pick up her social security check. And she said to me, “When does yours arrive?” I said, “I don’t know; it’s automatically deposited in my bank.” She said, “You don’t know when your social security check arrives?” I said, “No.” Because to me it makes no difference when it arrives; it is not going to affect my life any way. But to her it does because she lives from that check. But she just couldn’t get over the fact that somebody wouldn’t know when the check arrived. So, I have never been in that situation.

Ms. Alpert: That is fortunate. The second thing that I wanted to kind of go into a little bit is—because you talk about your daughter, Zia—so that’s kind of a good segue into this and the challenges of being a working mother and having a family to

take care of.

Ms. Fuentes: I had wanted a child all my life. I was just raised in a traditional home, and what I'd heard always was that a woman must get married and have a family. I didn't buy the "Get married" stuff; I didn't get married until I was 42. But I certainly bought into the "Have a child." stuff. I felt it was one of life's important experiences and I didn't want to miss it, and I wanted to have a daughter. In fact, I almost didn't marry my husband. He'd been previously married and had three children. Because when we were about to get married—planning on getting married—he said he didn't want any more children. He already had three and didn't want to go through that again. And I said—I think we were driving to the rabbi to make arrangements for getting married—and when I heard that, I said to him, "If you don't want to have children, we can turn around right now. Because I do want to have children, and, if you don't, there's no sense our going to the rabbi." And he then backed off, and he said. . . . We made a deal. He said that if I got pregnant within three months of our marriage, we would have a child; and, if not, we would forget about it. So, I made that deal because I figured that if I don't make it within three months, I'll ask for an extension. He thought he made a good deal because he was marrying a woman forty-two-years-old. What were the chances of her getting pregnant in the first three months of their marriage? Probably, not that great. So, he took that chance. So, under those circumstances, we got married. When we'd been married a short time—a really short time—I wasn't pregnant, and I was worried because I only had three months. So, I happened to be out

to lunch with this same Betty Murphy whose husband was a physician, a radiologist, and they had all kinds of connections with George Washington University Hospital. And I told her that I was concerned because I wasn't pregnant, and this and that. And I think she had also had some difficulty conceiving; she also got married a little bit later—not as late as I, I don't think—and she said to me, “What are you doing about it, Sonia?” Or “Sonny”—people called me “Sonny”—and I said, “Well, what do you mean, ‘What am I doing about it?’ I am sleeping with my husband.” She said, “Well, when you want a job or something, do you wait for it to happen to come to you?” I said, “No. I go out and look for jobs.” She said, “Well, you have to also go out and make this happen. And I think you should go see your gynecologist.” Because that's what she did; I think she did something like that. So, I went—my gynecologist was a guy named Thomas Gilday—I'm pretty sure that was his name. He had eight children, but when I went to him and told him that I wanted to get pregnant, he was discouraging me. And I figured what *chutzpah*, this guy has got eight kids and he doesn't want me to have *one*? But he discouraged me. He said if I do get pregnant, he'll put me on . . . oy, I can look it up in my book. What was that medicine that then the children had the most awful . . . they were born without arms. . . and. . .

Ms. Alpert:        Thalidomide?

Ms. Fuentes:       Thalidomide. I'm not sure if it was thalidomide, or something like that. It's in my book.

Ms. Alpert:        Something like that. Yeah.

Ms. Fuentes: Yeah. It's in my book. That he would put me on this drug so that I wouldn't lose the child. So, then, since he was discouraging—and I think I had been to him before I spoke to Betty—so then Betty sent me to her doctor with the George Washington University Hospital. I can't think of his name right now; it is in my book too. And he said, "Why are you here?" And I said, "Well, I am married three months and I am not pregnant yet." So, he laughed. He said, "People don't come with infertility problems when they are married three months. When they are married . . . . (I wasn't married three months then, I'm sorry. I was married a few weeks.) They don't come with fertility problems when they have been married a few weeks." I said, "Yes, but I only have three months." So, he said, "Well, I'll tell you what." He told me I should sleep with my husband on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> days after my period. And if I still wasn't pregnant after three months from my wedding, then I could come back to him. And in parting . . . I don't think it was thalidomide; I think it was something else.

Ms. Alpert: It was something else. I can't remember.

Ms. Fuentes: But it's in my . . . I could find it in a minute. DES. DES. And, in parting, I said to him . . . . boy, it is bothering me, I can't think of his name. Dr. Gilday, my other gynecologist/obstetrician, said to me that if I got pregnant, he would put me on DES so I wouldn't lose the child. But this doctor at George Washington University Hospital said to me, "I don't see any reason for that. You are built like an eighteen-year-old." So, that saved my life and my daughter's life. Because those are the children that later on had cancer of the

vagina and the grandchildren had cancer of the vagina, and the whole thing. So, then, just to the three months, I got pregnant. My husband wasn't happy about it, of course. And he didn't tell me to have an abortion, but I had a feeling that he might want it. And I said to him, "You might think I am going to have an abortion. I am not having an abortion." And that was the end of that. And so, then my daughter was born, the culmination of life-long dreams, and I think my husband was happy with her, too, and loved her. But he always used to say to me—and this really bothered me—and he had an excellent relationship with her; she loved him terribly. He used to say to me, "I like her now that she's here, but I didn't *need* her." And that used to hurt me very much. So, then she was born, and it was very difficult. I often say the most difficult part of raising my daughter was the lack of household help in this country, which is worse today than then—the lack of reasonable and competent household help. I call it "The Nightmare of Childcare." It's worse today because I had various arrangements, and they are spelled out in my book, people coming for the day and leaving and housekeepers. I found that what I really needed was a live-in housekeeper who would not only take care of my daughter, but clean the house and have supper ready. Because when I came home from work, six o'clock or something, there was no time for me to start supper and all the other things you have to do in a home. So, the problem was that Americans don't really want to live in. Like in some other countries, my husband told me, living in is considered a respectable, responsible position. But in the United States, the position that is acceptable is to work in an office,

or even a factory, but not in someone's home. So, when I got people who said they wanted to live in and they loved it and everything, none of them did it for more than a year. And they got a little money, and then they went out looking for something else. So, now here I had a full-time job that I had to be in every day, and a lot of times, or sometimes, I'd wake up in the morning and the housekeeper was gone. And I had to be in the office at nine o'clock. And I didn't have a housekeeper. So, this was very, very difficult. Then—and like this Betty—what's this? I can't think of her name now. Betty—Betty Murphy—the one that I mentioned several times, she did have a housekeeper who was with her throughout her—she had two children—throughout their growing-up years. I never had that. At most, I'd have somebody for a year or so, and then they'd get married or they would get another job. So, that went along all right, and then when my daughter was eleven . . . . Meanwhile, I got divorced when my daughter was about seven, or I separated from my husband when my daughter was about seven. That would have been the end of seventy-eight, and I got divorced in March of 1980. And I got custody, although my husband visited, and that was very hard on my daughter. She loved her father terribly. And it broke my heart that I had to go tell her. It really tore me apart to tell her because she was so crazy about her father. And it was a difficult time after that—she blamed me for the divorce, which was, I don't think was just, but that's how she saw it. And when he did something wrong—he'd forget an appointment or something—she would say I didn't tell him. So, then she turned eleven and she wanted to go—some boy had asked



her out on a date. He was thirteen. And she asked me if she could go. And I said I didn't know, but I would ask people in that field what to do and get back to her. So, I spent a whole day talking to people in childcare and what not, and they said that an eleven-year-old girl is not supposed to go out on a date one-on-one with a boy, but that I could tell her she could go out in a group with him, or she could bring him to the house for dinner, things like that. Well, I came home and told her that, and she was furious. She said that if I don't let her go out with him, he'll find another girl, and when I said she could bring him to our house for dinner, she said, "How could I bring him to a house like this?"—as if something was wrong with my home. That was the beginning of a difficult relationship with my daughter. And from then on, I had a difficult relationship with my daughter, and she just turned forty-two yesterday. We have been estranged for many years. Now, that happened after she graduated from college and then went to California, but it was a difficult relationship from then on. There were a number of reasons: she didn't like the fact that I worked, and was very—not only worked, but I was very committed to my work, to my career. She didn't like that and she made a number of comments indicating that she wanted a stay-at-home mother. She also once told me that when she got married, she wouldn't have children. And I asked her why not, and she said she didn't want to be the kind of mother I was—the kind that had children and went to work.

Ms. Alpert: Especially back then. There weren't as many woman who were working, too.

Ms. Fuentes: Correct. After we got divorced, I learned that for three months she didn't tell

anybody in her class that her parents had been divorced. And when I learned of this, I told her friends because nobody in her school was divorced. We lived at that time in Stamford, Connecticut, a good-sized eastern city, but nobody in her class was divorced—had parents who were divorced. She got married—to my surprise—I thought she'd get married very young because she's a beautiful young woman and bright—she was a National Merit Finalist and got a Master's in Business. So, she was dating early and I thought she'd get married, but she got married this past January. Six months after her wedding, she sent me pictures of her wedding and told me she got married in response to a letter I had sent her about some health issues. So, I did not respond to that. So, that's some of the problems I had with my child and being at work. In my marriage, I don't think my working caused any problems.

Ms. Alpert: So, that wasn't an issue.

Ms. Fuentes: Except that I always had to find help because I couldn't both work and run the household.

Ms. Alpert: Right. Right. Okay. All right. So we'll go back to you are moving to Washington to start a job with HUD.

Ms. Fuentes: Right.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. And how did that go?

Ms. Fuentes: Okay. One of the reasons I did that—my husband gave me good advice—he always said to me since I had left the government in seventy-three—he always said to me it would be a good idea for me at the end of my career to return to the government. Because then I could beef up my pension because I'd have

longer years of working—and at a higher salary. That was excellent advice.

So, my job at HUD was a boring job. I didn't really know anything about housing legislation.

Ms. Alpert: What was your job at HUD?

Ms. Fuentes: I was in the General Counsel's Office dealing with—in their Legislative Division—dealing with legislation affecting housing, and drafting legislation, or commenting on legislation, that kind of thing. I didn't find the whole housing field particularly interesting, nor did I know anything about it. But I had a nice boss, Jeff Lischer, and his boss, Ed Murphy, was also a nice guy. And I worked there for eight years until it was time for me to retire.

Ms. Alpert: Now, since then, since your—you know—since your retirement you have not been just sitting back and doing nothing. You have been involved in a whole lot of things to still try to advance women's issues. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Ms. Fuentes: Yes. Yes. Because unbeknownst to me after a very rocky start, after retirement and now at 85, I am in the most rewarding, exciting, fulfilling time of my life. Something I never expected. But the rocky start was as follows: I had a retirement party at HUD, and then I came home into a state of depression. Because I said to myself, "What now?" My daughter was away at college at that time. All my life—all my education had been geared to having a career, making an impact, women's rights, and moving upward and onward, and now it was over. It was a mind-blowing realization. At the same time, I had all these options. I had enough money so I didn't have to work, number 1,

or I could look for another full-time job or look for a part-time job or work in volunteer organizations or take courses at school. I didn't know what to do. I've written an article about this called, "My Life in Retirement." I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to help myself. So, I started to go to therapy. And I went to therapy for about a year-and-a-half. And I did a number of other things. I also started to go—not for a long time but for a few weeks—to Miami Beach to a cousin for a couple of weeks to get away from the winter. So, I did that. And then I tried some of those options: I tried to find a part-time job; and I tried to find a full-time job. And I got nothing. And I tried working at the Smithsonian as a volunteer, and I did that for a while. I got a whole bunch of orientation and training, and I did that for awhile, and then I left that. Then, I got a volunteer job which I kept for about a year. I got a job with the Montgomery County, Maryland—the county in which I lived—with their, whatever it was called, Human Relations Commission. It was an organization that did the same thing on the county level that the EEOC did on the federal level. And I worked there for about a year as—I don't know—I wasn't classified as a . . . . I worked as one of the people who handled cases coming in and investigating and this, that, and the other thing. But I only worked one day a week as this volunteer. Well, I found that very difficult because more would come in that day than I could finish in that day. And I was somebody that when it came in, I wanted to finish it. But no way I could do it in one day. So, at one point I told the boss of that agency that I was feeling so frustrated because I could not finish my work in the one day. And

he said nobody expects me to finish it in one day, and this kind of thing. But I was under such pressure to finish it in one day that I'd come home from that job—and I'd had back surgery in the past—but towards the latter part of that job, because of the stress of trying to finish everything in one day, when I came home, I had such back pain that I had to go to bed. And if the phone rang, I couldn't walk across the room to answer the phone because my back was in such pain. So, I gave up that job. For many years, people had told me that I needed to write a book about my experiences at the EEOC because it was a new agency, and I was the first woman in the General Counsel's Office. And I had kept a diary of my first six months at the EEOC, and I had also started to write a book at the EEOC with a fellow attorney, Cruz Reynoso, who later became a member of the Supreme Court of California, a very fine man. I did a lot of work on that book; it was all on the early cases of the EEOC, but then I saw that he wasn't writing word one. He didn't have the time or whatever. So, I did that for a while, and then because he wasn't doing it with me, I just stopped. But that diary is available for people at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, and also the work I put in on writing a book is at the Schlesinger Library. So, then I tried to find somebody who would work with me on this book that people told me to write because I felt writing was a lonely thing, and I had a basement full of documents and papers for the book, but I didn't want to be holed up doing that myself. So, I was looking for somebody to work with me and I found out—you always hear about these famous people write a book "as written with" Joe Blow and so on, so I was

looking for somebody like that. And I couldn't find anybody because unless you are a famous person, you can't find anybody who wants to write a book with you. One couple did answer. They were both professors at William and Mary College in Virginia, and they wanted to work with me on it, but they said it would take a year, they figured, and that I would have to pay their salaries. They would have to leave their teaching jobs for a year, and I would have to pay their salaries for the year that we were doing this. Now, I don't know, they quoted a figure of \$50,000, I remember. Well, I wasn't going to pay \$50,000, so that went away. So, then, I am trying to think how I connected with . . . oh, I know what . . . so then a friend of mine worked for the Foundation Center. The Foundation Center is an organization that deals with corporate donations to good causes. And she said the Foundation Center has a library in Washington, D.C., and that I should go there and look at their library for getting a grant to hire a writer to work with me on the book. So, I said that I would do that. And before I went to the library, I did something I have never done before or since in my life. I looked in the mirror, and I spoke to God. And I said, "God, I have tried everything I can to get this book written, and it is not happening. This is the last thing I am going to do about it. I am going to this Foundation Library to look about grants, and, if that doesn't work, I am finished with writing a book. If you want this book written, you will have to do something." And then I went to the Foundation Library. So, there I saw all kinds of brochures and things on grant writing, but grant writing is an art and a skill like—I don't want to say like being a lawyer because it doesn't take three

years—but it certainly takes some kind of education to . . . . And these were all brochures about learning how to apply for grants and this, that, and the other thing, and I didn't want to do that. Mixed in with all those grant brochures was a card from a woman and it said, "Sara Fisher—Writer/Editor." So, I went home and I called that Sara Fisher. And I told her what my situation is. And she said I should—that she would be willing to come meet me in Washington for lunch at a restaurant—and I have always remembered the restaurant and it's in my book—I can't remember the name of it— but she told me to meet her. We arranged to meet in this restaurant in Washington. So, I came in and I was trying to find what is this woman looked like who I am going to meet. And there was a woman who wore no makeup, a plain-looking woman, not attractive. So, I wasn't enthusiastic about the meeting, but I sat down and began to talk and she told me that, in addition to her being a writer, and that she was writing for a Catholic publication. In addition to doing that, she was also a tour guide around town, plus being a writer and an editor. And I said to her, "You and I have nothing in common." She paid absolutely no attention to me. It was as if I had said, "The sun is out," and she went on talking to me as if I had said nothing. And then she said to me—because I was talking about writing a book about the EEOC and my work there and my cases—she said to me, "That isn't the book you want to write." I said, "It's not?" She said, "No." She said, "You want to write a book about your life and your parents' lives—the kind of funny stories you've been telling me here. And you need to write it yourself. Forget about those other people." She said,

“You need to write it yourself and I’ll help you. Go home and start writing.”

So, I went home and I took her advice. I think she and I had one or two exchanges of e-mails—and I was using e-mail then—I had some questions about writing, and she answered me, but that was it as far as her helping me with the writing. I wrote that book myself. Every word. It took me five-and-a-half years. It was a difficult period because, first of all, I didn’t think it would take me five-and-a-half years; secondly, since I was writing about my life, I didn’t expect to have to do a lot of research. It turned out I did a tremendous amount of research because I am somebody that always likes to be accurate—everything has to be just so. I wanted to be sure that what I wrote was true. So, I would write, “In March, I went for this job.” And then I would say to myself, “Well, was that really in March?” What was the name of the job? What time was it? Where did it happen? And then I was off and running doing research. I also first wrote the book with my lawyer’s orientation, and it had one-hundred-and-sixteen footnotes. And then I realized that a book for the lay person can’t have one-hundred-and-sixteen footnotes, because . . . .

Ms. Alpert: Correct.

Ms. Fuentes: I was used to whatever I mentioned; I would have a footnote explaining everything. So, I had to take those footnotes out to the extent that I could. And then I was giving up a lot. I didn’t go to the movies; I didn’t go out with friends; a lot of things I didn’t do because I was keeping my nose to the grindstone. And it was difficult for this reason: I knew that I was a good attorney, and I had been writing stuff all my life—little things here and there



and some little things got published, some didn't. But I didn't know if I was a writer. So, here I said, "Oh, my God. I am giving away five-and-a-half years—it may all be for naught. I don't know if I am a writer. I don't know if anybody will ever publish my work. I don't know if anybody will ever read my work." So, that also made it difficult. The computer helped tremendously. I don't know how I would have done it without the computer because, first of all, you can write and then change things; you don't have to erase or whatever, you just move it and change it. And I could use the Internet for research; I didn't have to run around to every library. I could use the Internet. So then, after the five-and-a-half years, it was finished. Now, I also started something before it was finished. I would send individual—many of my stories are stand-alone stories. Also, I took a lot of stuff that I had written in the past and worked it in. So, I worked in past speeches; I worked in past articles, but some were also new. So, I started to send some of these stories to publications. And I wasn't very successful except after quite some time I started to get some pieces published. One piece was published in *The Women's Law Journal*, a piece I wrote called "Representing Women." That was one of the first pieces I had published. It was published in a law journal in the state of Washington. Then, I had a piece published in a magazine called *Café Solo*. So, some of these individual pieces started to get published. And then I started writing to publishers to publish my book. And I stopped keeping track at one hundred. All rejections. One woman, who is, I think, even to this day editor-in-chief of *Lilith* magazine, Susan Weidman Schneider, wrote to me that she thought I had

possibilities, and I should send her something in the future, and something like that. Another woman whom I knew—I'm trying to think of her name now—Florence Howe. She was the head of *The Feminist Press*, and I sent her a request to publish my memoir. And she said if I wrote a book of the kind I first wanted to write, about the history of the EEOC and my work there, that book she would be interested in publishing. But she was not interested in publishing my memoir. Then, I made a deal with a woman. She had a small publishing company in someplace like Arkansas or Arizona, or something like that. And we made an arrangement that she was going to publish the book. So, then I spent three months—because she sent me a sample contract, or not a sample contract, she sent me the kind of contract that she used that she said was prepared by “the best lawyer” in whatever state she lived in, Arizona or Colorado or something. Well, that document was a piece of shit. It was a very poor legal document. I spent three months working on that document to fix it up—not to change anything substantive, but just to fix it up because it was so poor. And I was about to send it to her after the three months' work and say, “Now I am ready to sign it.” When, all of a sudden, a clause caught my attention which, thank God, I saw it, because I had missed it before. And that clause said, once the book is published, if somebody sues her or me for invasion of privacy, libel, or anything else, she would handle the lawsuit. I would have no say in the lawsuit, but if a judgment was issued against her, it would be my responsibility to pay it.

Ms. Alpert: To pay it.

Ms. Fuentes: Now, I have seen these clauses. Sometimes newspapers—the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, they once wanted to publish a story of mine, and they wanted me to sign something like that, and I said, “Forget that. It’s ridiculous.” So, I wrote back and I said, “I just found this clause. There is no way I can sign this clause.” She said she wants that clause signed. I said, “Good-bye and good luck.” I wasn’t going to sign it. Oh, I got help. I was a member of the—there were two unions involved with writers. One of them, I think, was called the National Writers Union. And there was a guy named Phil, I forget his last name, who was the guy I dealt with from that union. And I asked him what to do about this clause. And he sent me like a fifty-four-page book, which I think I still must have somewhere—I don’t know where—which set forth what the National Writers Union advised writers. And one of them was you don’t sign such a clause. So, that gave me more impetus to write to this woman and say, “There is no way I am going to sign this clause.” So, at this point I started to learn about on-demand publishing, publishing on demand. And I got in touch with one such publisher, I forget their name but I have it somewhere, and I arranged with them for self-publishing. They were going to publish my book, and I forget what I was going to pay them for it. And it was supposed to be ready—I’ll make up a month—in September of—I started coming to Sarasota in 1994, so maybe it was supposed to be ready in 1993. On the basis of that, I made arrangements—oh, I didn’t talk about the fact that meanwhile I started coming to Sarasota for the winters. I have to digress now and go into that. That is another change that happened when I retired. I started coming to

Miami Beach when I was, I think I might have told this before, I was eight or ten-years-old,

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: because I had asthma. And then when I retired, I had a cousin who owned a condo on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach, in the Winston Towers, and I started to go and spend two weeks with her every winter. Because one time—the Washington area gets iced up—and one time it was iced up, and for three or six weeks I couldn't leave my home because of the ice. And that's when I decided I am not going to live like this, and I started to go away for the winters. This cousin loved me very much, and she was very happy to have me come down for the two weeks that I used to come down for. But I was with her—the last time I went down—and all of a sudden I said to her and to myself, "I don't like Miami Beach. I've never liked Miami Beach. I am not coming back here anymore." And I went to my cousin and I wanted to leave. So, she got down on her knees—she's a European woman—she got down on her knees and pleaded with me not to go home. So, I said, "O.K. I am not going to go home early, but I am not coming back here again." So, then I didn't know where to go in the winter when it got bad. And I had a friend, Irene Herman, she's to this day . . . and her husband, and he had lost his job so he took like early retirement. He had been fired. And they moved to Sarasota. First, I think they went to Orlando and then they came to Sarasota. She was always writing me, "You must come to Sarasota. You'll love it. You must come." But she never said, "Come and stay with me." So, I figured, how

can I go to Sarasota? Where will I stay? So, then I happened to get the catalog from Elderhostel. They are now called Road Scholar, and there was a program—I think for a week—at a hotel, the Ramada Inn in Venice. So, I figured I'll go see what that area is like. It is near Sarasota. And I also figured that after that week at Elderhostel, I'll go to Sarasota and stay at a hotel or something like that, a rental apartment. So, I asked this Irene Herman where to stay: "Can you recommend a hotel or apartment or something I could go to?" They said they don't know because they live here. But they referred me—I can't think of their names now—to a couple who were friends of theirs and friends of mine. And I called her up, and I said, "I am going to Sarasota for a week or so. Where can I stay?" And they said, well, they always rent when they come down, they always rent in The Meadows. So, I rented a one-bedroom apartment in The Meadows and came down to that Elderhostel, and a friend came down with me. She has a son who works in Sarasota. A friend came down with me for a week at Elderhostel, and then I moved to The Meadows for a week. And it was love at first sight. I fell in love with Sarasota. So, I wanted to extend my week at The Meadows, but there was no space available. So, I came back after a week. So, that started me coming to Sarasota. And every year I came for a little bit longer until in March of ninety-nine, I bought a condo—this condo.

Ms. Alpert: And so, then, what did that have to do with the publication of . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: I am going to tell you.

Ms. Alpert: Okay. I knew you were leading to something.

Ms. Fuentes: I told you it was a digression. But you are right. So, then when I made that deal with this publisher, I got eight speaking engagements lined up in Sarasota in connection with my book. I was going to speak at the Jewish Community Center, I was going to speak at Temple Emanu-El, and there were four others. I don't recall if they were all here or if they were back in Washington, whatever. So, then the time was coming when the publisher was supposed to publish my book. So, I wrote to them and I said, "How are you coming with the book?" And the head of the company wrote me back and said, "Sorry. We are not going to be able to keep that schedule. And we won't be able to have your book until sometime in the future." I said, "Oh, my God! I have these eight speaking engagements lined up, at which time I was going to sell the book.

Ms. Alpert: Sell the book. Right.

Ms. Fuentes: And it isn't going to be available. I didn't know what I was going to do. And just about that time, I got an email from a company called Xlibris Corporation. They were another publish-on-demand company, print on-demand—I forget what it's called at the moment. So, I got in touch with them, told them what had happened with the other company, and they said they could have the book ready in time. And I recall what I paid them. I paid them eight-hundred dollars to publish the book, and then they had a deal where they publicized the book. And I paid another three hundred dollars for that. That was a wasted three hundred dollars. I got not a single thing from that. I have worked like a demon; I worked publicizing my book, but I did it all myself.

Ms. Alpert: You should mention the name of the book.

Ms. Fuentes: Oh, the name of the book is called “Eat First.” I have a story about that title; it’s in the book. The name of the book is *Eat First—You Don’t Know What They’ll Give You*. And the subtitle is *The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter*. The reason I made the subtitle is you wouldn’t know from the title what the book is about. I once was handing out flyers about the book—I think in Stamford, Connecticut—and a woman took the flyer and said, “Thanks a lot, but I have enough diet books already.”

Ms. Alpert: Right. You would assume. And I will say that the book is certainly well written. You can tell you wrote it; it is in your voice; and it’s actually really fascinating. You start reading it; you don’t want to put it down. It is an interesting, interesting story. And it is told very well.

Ms. Fuentes: Thank you. But many people have told me what you said, that it is as if they heard me speaking.

Ms. Alpert: It is.

Ms. Fuentes: So, it is in that voice.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: So, now where were we? So, I made this deal with Xlibris. You want to know how the book got that title, or you don’t?

Ms. Alpert: No. Tell me.

Ms. Fuentes: I originally gave it another title. And that title was something like “Laughing Through My Fears” or “Laughing Through My Tears,” something like that. And I took two courses, both of which were very helpful. I took a course in

Bethesda, which this Sara Fisher was a part of, called the Bethesda Writers Workshop. And then I went to a writers group here in Sarasota that met at Borders bookstore, one of the bookstores—no, it was Barnes & Noble's bookstore. And a woman once came in to that group and she was raving. She had just come from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. They have a summer program for memoir writing. And I took that, and both of them were tremendously helpful to me. So, when I was in the Bethesda Writers course, I mentioned to the teacher that the name of my book was going to be "Laughing Through my Fears," or something. So, he said—and my book is suffused with humor—so, he said to me, "If you write a funny book, you need a funny title." So, that went into my head. But I didn't have a funny title. So, once I was in a bookstore going through a display of books and the *Eat First* title came into my head. And it was from something my mother used to tell me. My mother kept a kosher home. And she cooked for me and my father with a great deal of love. My parents very rarely went out to eat. That wasn't the style among people of their class from Poland and Germany. They didn't go out to eat much in this country. So—but when I was growing up, I started to go out to eat. People invited me to their homes or to a restaurant, and my mother wasn't comfortable with it because she didn't know what kind of food I would be getting there—whether it would be kosher, whether it would be fresh, whether it would be good. So, when I was going out to dinner someplace, she would say, "Eat first. You don't know what they'll give you." She wanted me to eat a complete dinner home before I went out to dinner elsewhere. So, that saying



popped into my mind while I was going through books at a bookstore display,  
and that's how that became the title of my book.

ORAL HISTORY OF  
SONIA PRESSMAN FUENTES  
ON BEHALF OF WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LAW,  
A PROJECT OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION,  
SENIOR LAWYERS DIVISION

BY LIZ ALPERT

SIXTH INTERVIEW  
MARCH 22, 2014

Ms. Alpert: This is Liz Alpert, and I am here with Sonia Pressman Fuentes, and this is another in our continuing series of interviews regarding her trailblazing efforts for the women's movement. And today is March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, and, again, it is good to see you, Sonia. And what we wanted to talk about today was post-career. Once you retired from the EEOC and the corporations where you worked, I know you haven't been just sitting back and enjoying retirement and doing nothing. You have continued to be an activist, so why don't you tell us a little bit about what you've been doing?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, first of all, I retired on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1993. So it's been what? Twenty years—more than twenty years since I retired—which is an amazing fact to me. I don't think I ever contemplated such a retirement. And I have—I don't know whether to say I have created or it has evolved—a totally new life for myself in Sarasota, Florida, which has been the most fulfilling, meaningful, wonderful stage of my life from the time I was born. And. . . .

Ms. Alpert: I think that's a good thing for everyone to hear, because sometimes you think retirement means the end of any type of accomplishments or fulfillments, so I

know I appreciate hearing that.

Ms. Fuentes: Well, thank you for saying that. But it didn't start off that way. When I first retired, I really went into a funk because all my life had been devoted to moving upward and onward in my education first and then in my career, and I always had that goal of moving on to the next step. And, all of a sudden, it seemed to me it was all over. I had many options: I could have gotten a part-time job; I could have looked for a full-time job; I could have taken courses at different colleges; I could have traveled. These are the things that appeared to me as options, and I could have done volunteer work at organizations. And I did a number of those things. I worked for about a year for the Montgomery County, Maryland—I don't remember the name of it—but it was on the county level what the EEOC did on the national level. And I did that for about a year. And I was a volunteer for the Smithsonian for a while, and took training for that, and did that for awhile. So, I had all these options. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. And I started going to a therapist. And I went to a therapist for about a year-and-a-half because I just didn't know what to do with my life, and I was disappointed that everything was over with. So, then, two things happened: It was a long process, but I decided to write a memoir. And that took me five-and-a-half years. And I wrote a memoir called *Eat First — You Don't Know What They'll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter*. And it was written with humor because I am known for having a sense of humor, and I very often write that way, but not always. But this book actually has some mixture of serious stuff and

humor. And I was very concerned as to what kind of a book it would be that has both humor and serious stuff, and once the book was published—this is what I worried about throughout the writing of the book—and once the book was published, it never came up, and, of course, life is both serious and humorous. So, that was the big problem I had the whole time I was writing it, and it turned out not to be a problem. So, I wrote my memoir, and that really totally changed my life because as a speaker, the fact that you have written a book—actually everybody likes my book and it's been very well received—but it doesn't matter, it seems when you write a book the fact that you are a published author gives you a kind of credibility you do not otherwise have. It is interesting to me because there are millions of people writing books, and, yet, most people who meet you don't know somebody else who has written a book. Or, they don't know a lot of people who've written a book, and being an author is something special. That's the first thing that changed my life after I retired. And the second thing was I started coming down to Sarasota, initially as a snowbird. I would first come down for a few weeks, and then a few more weeks, and then a few months, and this and that, and that started in 1994. And then in 1999, I purchased the condo in which I am now living, a two-bedroom, two-bath condo. After twelve years of moving back and forth all the time, it got to be too much for me. And it was also difficult when something went wrong in my Florida condo, and I was up in Maryland, to deal with that. So, I moved here full-time on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006, and shortly thereafter I sold my condo in Potomac, Maryland. The other thing is that I always thought if I had

to choose between the Washington, D.C. area and the Sarasota area, I would select Sarasota. But I always thought that I would then sell this two- bedroom, two-bath condo and buy a bigger place because in Potomac I was living in a three-level townhouse with a lot more space and a basement and everything. Well, what happened when I came down, I immediately didn't have room for all my papers and files and everything. So, the first thing I had to do is I hired an outfit here called Closet Tec and paid eight-thousand dollars and they redid my guest room so that in addition to being a guest room, it also has room for all my files and papers and books. After I paid eight-thousand dollars to them to do this, I didn't think that I was now going to move to another place. So, I've never moved. So, when I came here—when I started to come here—I knew one person here and her name is Irene Herman. (And I just made a dinner engagement to meet with her.) Irene Herman and her husband, Ken, used to live in Stamford, Connecticut when I used to live there, and she had been state coordinator for NOW in Connecticut. And, then, her husband lost his job and couldn't find another, and they ended up moving to Sarasota. And she was constantly writing me, "You must come down here. It's lovely." And so and so.

Ms. Alpert: So, that is what originally brought you to Sarasota?

Ms. Fuentes: That's what brought me to Sarasota. But I knew the one person, or two, Irene and her husband, and I had really nothing going for me here as far as connections or anything like that. I have built the most incredible life here. I am involved in more activities than I care to say—and I keep saying, "No" to

things—and, nonetheless, I am always overwhelmed with things to do. There are a lot of organizations and activities and programs here and the other thing is I have become here something I wasn't in Washington or anyplace else or . . . to this extent: a prominent person. My father used to say if you want to—I don't know, be something or other—go to a small town. In Washington, I was one of many people with the kind of expertise and knowledge and education that I had. But, here, it's special. And I am, wherever I go here, somebody. . . . People recognize me. They heard me give a speech; they read about me in the newspaper. Yesterday, I went to my congregation's services, and afterwards we have an Oneg Shabbat where refreshments are served. And I am sitting at a table and a man and a woman I have never seen before sit down next to me and begin to talk to me—and they are fairly new members of the congregation—and the woman tells me she's read my book. I've never seen her in my life; I don't know who she is; she knew who I was. So, this happens to me all the time here. So, it's a very nice kind of life to have that kind of recognition—the Yiddish word is *koved*, the kind of respect that I have here. The weather is wonderful. Also, I am very much involved with that which I was involved with before, but in a different way. I remain very actively involved in women's rights, and I am in touch with the people who are still alive who were involved with me then, and with lots of new people. I mentor two young women, and there is so much here to do. This past week, I attended the Jewish Film Festival. I went to six films in five days, which really set me back terribly, and I am way behind on everything. To give you an example of

the kind of thing that happens, this past week a man I never heard of contacted me. He turns out to be the current general counsel of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And he said that he goes around speaking about the EEOC and he is very interested in its early history and that wherever he looked in researching, my name came up or my memos came up. So, he wanted to make a connection to me, and he wanted to talk with me about the early days—particularly the early days with regard to women’s rights—because I am the only person alive who knows about that. And, so, we had a lovely conversation, he and I and an intern who works for him, and we have exchanged documents. Things like this happen to me all the time. So, I am a resource for a great many people. In addition, when I came here, I started giving talks. Well, I’d already given talks always for the EEOC. So, I continued that when I retired, but now I am giving talks for myself, not the EEOC. So, I am constantly giving talks. I am constantly writing speeches. I write articles; they are published on the Internet. So, I have the busiest life I’ve ever had—and the most fulfilling.

Ms. Alpert: What are you giving speeches on? Is it on your book mostly or about your career at the EEOC or your career with women’s rights?

Ms. Fuentes: I have a list of about eight subjects I could speak on. And one of them is my life, and I have given a number of speeches about my life. But the most popular speech—the one I give ninety-nine percent of the time—is about the women’s rights movement. I discuss the history of the women’s rights movement; I mention the Seneca Falls convention in 1848; but basically I talk

about the second wave, which started in the early sixties and the mid-sixties. So, I tell people what the United States was like for women before 1965, all the tremendous changes that have occurred since 1965, and I discuss the major laws and organizations. And, then, I discuss the remaining problems for women, both in the United States and abroad. And I just gave that speech, the last time I gave it was March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, in Ft. Meyers, Florida to the League of Women Voters there. And it was really a revelation to me. I've been giving—my book was published in November 1999—and I have been giving talks since then. The most books I have ever sold at one event I sold this past March 1<sup>st</sup> at this speech to the League of Women Voters. There were sixty people present and I sold twenty-one books. I've never had anything like it. The most books I've sold before that was twenty books when I spoke to the Women Lawyers of Utah, and there were two hundred people there.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: This was sixty people and a number bought two and three books, and a lot of people have asked me, "Why do you think you got such a reception?" And now people who heard me there are working to get me to come back and give other talks to other organizations there. I was just invited to give the keynote talk for the Women's Democratic Club of Florida in St. Augustine this September. But I won't be doing that because they can't afford to bring me there. But I've been getting these requests since I gave that talk. And when people ask me, "Why do you think you got such a response?" I can only guess that there are a lot of feminists in that area, and apparently somebody like me



never spoke to them before because the reaction has been outstanding.

Ms. Alpert: Well, you touched on in your speech that you give now about women's rights. You talk about the current situation of women's rights, you know, nationally and internationally. What are you saying at this point?

Ms. Fuentes: Well, I'd have to really look at my last speech to remember all the things, but basically what I say is that the remaining problems—a lot of people in this country think that all the problems for women have been solved, and now we can move on to other things.

Ms. Alpert: In fact, I had a conversation the other day mentioning that with a male who said, "Why is the President now talking about, you know, equal pay? We are already there. We don't need to worry about this anymore."

Ms. Fuentes: A lot of people have that mistaken impression.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: And I say two things about it. One, the kind of problems we have now are not like the black and white issues that we had in the sixties. They are more subtle; they require more work. But when I gave a talk at Cornell about this in October of 2012, I listed twenty-seven problems that remained to be dealt with in the United States and another ten or twelve worldwide in addition to those. And I wasn't making an exhaustive list; I was just picking some outstanding problems. But you can take any area—we talked about equal pay—we don't have equal pay in this country. We have laws that require equal pay, but the latest figure that I know is that women in the United States now make something like seventy-eight cents for every dollar men make. And just

yesterday I got an email from Heidi Hartmann, who is a feminist activist in Washington and has an organization, a complicated article that the wage gap hasn't budged. And I haven't studied it, but a big remaining area is equal pay. I could go on and on. It would be easier if I had my speech in front of me, but I can mention any number of problems that need to be dealt with.

Ms. Alpert: Well, you know, without your speech in front of you, just things that come to mind that you see yourself as problems.

Ms. Fuentes: All right, well, right now and for a number of years now, the Republicans have been waging a war against women, and they are passing laws in states throughout the United States that cut down on women's access to abortion, and clinics are closing and this is an emergency situation. Somebody in one of the articles I read, a woman, said whether or not you can get an abortion these days depends on where you live. And those of us who are feminist activists believe that the right to an abortion is something that is basic to women's reproductive rights. And that is being whittled down every day. So, that is a big area. Violence against women continues to be a very serious area all over the world and, of course, in the United States. It's a particular problem in the military; it has been increasing in the military. It involves both men and women being raped and sexually attacked; worldwide, it's a very big problem. There was a report issued in the past year or two about femicide, the killing of women and girls, and it's on the increase. Also, on college campuses there is a lot of rape. So, that is another big area that needs to be dealt with. Child care—my daughter is about forty-one years old. When I was raising her, the most

difficult problem I had was finding competent and affordable child care. This is over forty years ago, and, keep in mind, that I was an attorney making a good salary. That problem is no better today than it was over forty years ago. This country has not focused on the fact that we don't have affordable and competent child care. A very big problem is that we talk about women going to work all the time, but who's taking care of the kids? Developing a balance between work and family life remains a serious problem and, of course, the lack of child care contributes to that. In parts of the world, contraception is not accessible and abortion is not accessible. And—I don't have the figures in front of me—there are women who die, also in connection with childbirth and pregnancy overseas, who would not have died—need not have died—if they had adequate medical care. Prison is a big problem. Women in—first of all, many women get to prison not necessarily or not only because of what they did but because of systemic factors. I don't know if that is the right word, but because they grew up in a home where their father might have abused them or there are drugs or whatever. And, then, women in prison very often are subjected to groping and other sexual attacks by guards. Seventy percent of the guards in the prisons where women are males. And in some places women were shackled when they were delivering a child. That was the case in Florida but there was a law that stopped it. Take, if you will, the entertainment industry. There aren't enough women as writers, producers, directors, and actors on TV. And the movies—you name it—the percentage is way too low. The percentage of women in our House and Senate is too low. It is eighteen

percent— way too low. We are over half the population. We still haven't had a woman President or Vice President. You could just name any area of life, and the problems for women are there.

Ms. Alpert: Do you see your role now as basically educating people about these things so that they know what's going on, or they think about it so that they can take some kind of action?

Ms. Fuentes: Absolutely. That is exactly a wonderful question, that is exactly how I see my role. I am in a particular position because as I realized when talking to this general counsel, and his name is David Lopez, the general counsel of the EEOC, nobody has my experience with women's rights at the EEOC. There isn't anybody else. So, I am fortunate to be alive to be this resource for people. So, I definitely see my role as educating people. As I said, I mentor a couple of young women, but I do this for not just the two women that I mentor but a lot of people. And I love doing it.

Ms. Alpert: Is that really what prompted you to write your memoir? Or what was the . . .

Ms. Fuentes: No.

Ms. Alpert: motivation beside it to do that? Because to take five-and-a-half years of your life, that was a big chunk . . . .

Ms. Fuentes: I didn't know that was going to happen. I had no idea when I started. What happened was people said to me for a long time, "You need to write a book." And they were thinking about my experience at the EEOC.

Ms. Alpert: Right.

Ms. Fuentes: And they didn't want me to write a memoir; they wanted me to write a history

of the early days of the EEOC. And I didn't want to do it because writing is hard work and it's lonesome work, and so I didn't want to do it. And I also had a basement in my Potomac home that was filled with files and papers. I have just about everything that is of historical value, but yesterday when I was talking to the general counsel, I mentioned a whole bunch of things. And then I was tickled pink. I went to my EEOC files, and I found everything I had mentioned to him.

Ms. Alpert: Wow!

Ms. Fuentes: So, that was a thrill because a lot of times you can't find stuff. So, I didn't want to write this book. So, I thought I'll get somebody to write it with me. And then it will be fun. So, I spent considerable time looking for somebody to write the book with me. But unless you are famous, you can't really get somebody who wants to write a book with you. I did find one couple, they were a husband and wife and they were professors at, I think, the College of William & Mary in Virginia. And they said they wanted to take off a year from being professors, and they would work with me on the book. But then I would have to pay them the loss of their salary for that year, which amounted to one hundred thousand dollars. So, I didn't do that. So, then, I had a friend who worked for the Foundation Center. That is an organization which works with corporations to do charitable giving. So, she said to me—her name was Jean Bohlen, "You know, the Foundation Center has a library in Washington, D.C. You could go there and look up about grants. And, then, you could get a grant and that would pay for you to hire a writer to work with you." So, I said,

“That sounds like a good idea.” So, before that, I did something that I have never done before or after. I went to the bathroom and looked at the mirror and spoke to God. And I said, “God, I have tried everything I can to write this book and it’s not happening. So, now I am going to this Foundation Center to look about a grant.” And I said, “If you want this book written, after I do this, you are going to have to do it because I have done everything I can think of.” And, then, I went to the Foundation Center Library. So, their library had tons of material on grants, but it’s a whole field like any field, like being a lawyer or something. And it talked about—that I would have to take courses to learn how you apply for a grant. And I had friends who apply for grants, and it’s a skill and an art, and I wasn’t about to do that. Mixed in with all these brochures was a business card from a woman named Sara Fisher, who described herself on the card as a writer and an editor. So, I took that card. I either took the card or else I made a note. And I went home, and I called this Sara Fisher, and I told her what I was about, and she suggested that we meet. I guess we met for coffee or for lunch at a restaurant in Washington, D.C. It’s in my book; I don’t remember the name of it now anymore. So, I met with this woman, and she was a very plain-looking woman. She didn’t have any makeup on, and we began to talk. She said that she is a writer and editor, but that she also—and she was working for some Catholic newspaper that she was the editor of, or something like that, and that she was also a tour guide in Washington, D.C. So, I said to myself, “I have absolutely nothing in common with this woman.” And I said, “Sara” (or Miss Fisher, or whatever I called

her)—I said, “We don’t have anything in common; I don’t see any purpose to this.” And she acted like I’d never said anything, and she just went ahead with her conversation. And we talked a little bit more, and she said, with my regard to writing a book about the cases at the EEOC and that kind of thing—I am going to digress for a moment—I did start to write a book with a colleague at the EEOC named Cruz Reynoso about the early cases at the EEOC. But it went on for quite a while, and he hadn’t written a word. And I had written a whole bunch of stuff. And, so, we discontinued that project because I was doing it and he wasn’t. But I had done a great deal and that material is now at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. I didn’t finish the book, but there is a lot of good material there. So, back to my coffee with Sara Fisher. So, after we talked for a while speaking about a book about the EEOC, she said to me, “That isn’t the book you want to write.” I said, “It’s not?” She said, “No. You want to write a book about yourself and your family with the kinds of humorous stories you’ve been telling me here. And I’ll help you with it,” she said. “And you have to write it alone.” So, that’s what happened. I went home, and I started to write that book. At one point, I had some questions, and I asked her and she answered me. But that was the end of her involvement. And that is the book that I wrote.

Ms. Alpert: So, do you have any thoughts, any words of wisdom to other women lawyers who are starting their careers or wanting to do something great with their life?

Ms. Fuentes: My initial response to that is, “No.” But there is only one thing that I think about that happened with me that I would like to share with other people.

Once I got into the field of women's rights at the EEOC—and for the rest of my career, lawyers and other people would come to me and say, “You need to get out of women's rights because that isn't going anywhere, and you are not going to make any money doing that. You need to go into corporate work or some other field of law where you are going to be successful and you move up and you will make money.” I never really gave that any serious thought because I was so into women's rights with my whole soul and still am—it's my passion—that I never paid a lot of attention to that, but it could have swayed somebody else, you know, but it wasn't me. And look at what a rich life I've had! So, I would say to women or men, “If you are doing something which is your passion . . . .” Now, keep in mind, I was never destitute financially. I always had enough money, and I wasn't living like some kind of a kook on the street or anything like that. So, I would say to somebody, “If you have a passion, if you can work in that passion while leading what I would call an average or a normal life, then don't listen to anybody else. Do what is within you to do.”