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AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE AND
THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN**

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INTERVIEWER: SANDRA BERMAN
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INTERVIEW BEGINS

Sandra: This is the Gerald A. Blonder, "Jerry" interview for the Jewish Oral History Project of Atlanta, co-sponsored by the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, the American Jewish Committee and the National Council of Jewish Women.

Gerald: I really lived a charmed life. I grew up in a small town . . . Port Chester, New York, which is about 35 miles from New York City on the borderline with Greenwich, Connecticut. My dad was in the milk business. He was a milkman. I used to hear stories about my mom and dad that gave credibility to hopes of being a really good person. People would tell me how my mother would work on the truck with my dad when she was pregnant with my sister. Being in the milk business in Port Chester, we were quite a well-known family. We did have a lot of customers. I loved growing up in Port Chester. It was my town. My sister and I were part of the community. So were my parents. I never thought when I was really young that I would leave Port Chester. The more I realized as I got older, I didn't want to be a milkman. I didn't want to be in the milk business. I didn't know what I wanted to do. My mom was one of four sisters. She grew up in New York City. Dad died when he was 40 . . . lived a very tough life on the East Side. My father ran away from Poland when he was 13. We learned early on—[my sister] Phyllis and I—that things weren't always easy. We were able to adjust because my parents doted on us. I think that there was nothing we could do wrong. I will say to Phyllis,

particularly, “There’s nothing that you can do wrong. If there’s anything that anybody has done wrong it’s my [fault].” Anyway, it was wonderful. My mother’s three sisters migrated to Atlanta.

Sandra: What was your mother’s name?

Gerald: Pauline. Her maiden name was Pauline Janowitz [sp]. My dad was Irving. They didn’t marry real young, but they weren’t quite that old. My mom lived to be 97. It was good stock along the way. The genes were good. We did learn some things, a lot of things. With the aunts moving and their families being here in Atlanta, I used to visit during the summers when I was a teenager. I had a love affair with Atlanta from the time I was 13. I said, “Someday I’m going to move to Atlanta.”

Sandra: Where did they live?

Gerald: At one point on Noble Drive . . . part of the family. Another time on Briarcliff Place, off of North Highland Avenue . . . then on Wildwood Road. It was primarily in northeast [Atlanta]. I think they actually started in an apartment—old apartments on 10th Street at Grady High School. That was when I was really young.

Sandra: What did you do here in the summers?

Gerald: It was wonderful. I swam. We really had nothing on our minds, except to play. My cousins were great playmates. My family would take us to the movies. At that time there were basically three clubs in Atlanta: the old Standard Club,¹ the Mayfair Club,² and the Progressive Club.³ My family belonged to the Progressive Club. We would go there for dinner. That was really where most Jewish families would go for entertainment and dinner. There were maybe

¹ The Standard Club is a private, country club, with a Jewish heritage dating back to 1867. The club originated as Concordia Association in Downtown Atlanta. In 1905 it was reorganized as the Standard Club and moved into the former mansion of William C. Sanders near where Turner Field is now located. In the late 1920’s the club moved to Ponce de Leon Avenue in Midtown Atlanta. The club later moved to the Brookhaven area and opened in what is now the Lenox Park business park. It was located there until 1983 when the club moved to its present location in Johns Creek in Atlanta’s northern suburbs.

² The Mayfair Club opened in 1938 at 1456 Spring Street in Midtown Atlanta and was a focal point of Jewish life in the city for more than 25 years. The club was founded in 1930 and first met at the Biltmore Hotel. The club was visited by Eleanor Roosevelt, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, Mayors Ivan Allen and William Berry Hartsfield, senators Herman Talmadge and Richard Russell, and Governor Carl Sanders. Fire destroyed the Mayfair Club on December 4, 1964.

³ The Progressive Club was a Jewish social organization that was established in 1913 by Russian Jews who felt unwelcome at the Standard Club, where German Jews were predominant.

three other restaurants in Atlanta at that time, other than Krystal.⁴ We just had a free-spirit type of life.

Sandra: What were their names, the aunts that moved here?

Gerald: My aunt, Ann Fields, was originally Fustfields [sp]. Jerry Fields and Ilene Silverman are her children. My aunt, Florence Rachelson . . . Phyllis Joffre is her daughter. One aunt, Francis Richkin [sp], had no children. They all worked together. They owned a company—my Aunt Florence did—called Southern Merchandise. Southern Merchandise was a wonderful company in those days. Unfortunately, we really did have a tragedy in our lives. My uncle—who was Florence Rachelson's [sp] husband—died when he was 40. Just out of the clear blue. He had pneumonia. He had built a wonderful business. Subsequently, the business was sold to Sol Singer. That's where Sol came in—from Columbus [Georgia]—with Southern Merchandise. That caused a lot of family problems. [My uncle] was more than just titular head of the family. He was the soul of the family here in Atlanta. That made a big difference with his demise.

Sandra: You were here in the summers and went back to New York in the winters. But you had a love affair with Atlanta?

Gerald: I did. I still loved Port Chester, while I was going to high school. I adored it. I really did. But I loved Atlanta. I knew that in Port Chester there was a possibility I could dry up, because I knew I didn't want to go into the milk business. It would be difficult, working with my dad. Not that we didn't love each other, but sometimes in business that wouldn't jell. Secondly, it was an awful business. The union conditions and other conditions were really bad. Thirdly, I really wanted to do something on my own. Not that I knew I was capable of doing anything. But I knew I wanted to do something. I couldn't imagine what I could do, but I really wanted to try.

Sandra: When did you come down here?

Gerald: Before I came down here I met . . . I was introduced, by a girl that I grew up with, to another female by the name of Lois Semel. Lois Semel was from New York City. She was quite attractive at that time. We liked each other, but somehow or another we just didn't make it in the beginning. Then I had stayed home. I was going to the University of Georgia [Athens, Georgia],

⁴ Krystal is an American fast food restaurant chain known for its small, square hamburgers with steamed-in onions. Krystal moved its corporate headquarters from Chattanooga, Tennessee, where it had been based since 1932, to Atlanta in early 2013.

to make a long story short. My mom was not doing well physically. I stayed home to go to New York University [New York, New York] for one year. I missed Lois a lot, so I went to Atlanta to see her. Believe it or not, we still talk about it. I proposed. Even more, believe it or not, she accepted. That probably was the very beginning of my good luck, my [good] fortune. I didn't really know that I struck it rich at that time, but I did.

Sandra: Lois is originally from New York also?

Gerald: Right.

Sandra: How did she end up . . . ?

Gerald: Her family moved to Atlanta. Her dad was in the jewelry business. He worked with a wholesale company called Cohen & Sons. Their Atlanta branch was in trouble. They offered the position of management to Lois's dad. He accepted because he wanted to get out of New York City. Lois was very close to her mom and dad, very close. There was no doubt in her mind that she would go to the University of Georgia, because she wanted to be with her folks. She had started college originally at Champlain College [Burlington, Vermont] at 16. So she had a few years to play with. Paul and Mildred [Semel] moved to Atlanta. That's why they came here. They made a lot of nice friends. They were lovely people. The funny thing that I constantly tell Mom . . . you can print this or not . . . is that I tell Lois . . . is that I know your mother always said, "He's not going to amount to anything." I just wish she was here today to know what our marriage has been and what we've done. I just wish that she could be here.

Sandra: What a wonderful story. Was this culture shock for the two . . .? You came down here in the summers. But for a New York family to move down here in the 1950's . . . what did you think when you first got down here?

Gerald: I was more used to it. When I used to ride the bus to go to the old Progressive Club on 10th Street from Northeast Atlanta, the signs used to read: "Coloreds from rear to front. Whites from front to rear." It was really a culture shock for Lois: separate drinking fountains, separate bathrooms, and no integrated facilities. Lois decided that she would finish college. She went to Oglethorpe [University—Atlanta, Georgia] when we were married already. We were living in the first real estate investment I had that my dad help me buy. She would walk from Piedmont Road and 14th Street to West Peachtree Street and 14th Street, and she would get on the bus. One day she got on the bus and sat down next to a black person. The bus driver stopped the bus and

said, “Lady, we don’t do that down here.” [He] made her get up. This was the domestic bus that used to go out to Oglethorpe, in that area. [He] made her get up. Until that person moved, she had to stand up with her books. I would say this was a real culture shock for Lois, in particular.

Sandra: Just the fact that you’ve recounted this story, it must have made a big impression on her that day?

Gerald: It did, it did. It was very difficult for the both of us . . . in the ensuing years. Not to jump around . . . but in business relationships . . . some of my closest and dearest friends were black. In those days, they didn’t talk about ‘joint venture.’ You just didn’t do things like that. It was a big culture shock for Lois and me. We didn’t like it. Separate entrances at movie theaters. You name it, it was separate.

Sandra: So we were getting to how you got started. You first came down here in 1954, I think you said?

Gerald: 1955.

Sandra: In 1955. What made you get involved in the real estate business, the apartments business?

Gerald: The first investment that my dad helped me with was 50 furnished units on Piedmont Road and 14th Street. The profiles on the apartments were that in 50 units, there were about 15 vacancies, 15 prostitutes, 10 alcoholics, and 1 bank robber. Lois and I thought it was a very illustrious career. I don’t know why we continued it, actually. We must have had some determination to do it. There were 50 furnished efficiencies.⁵ We used to kid one another that they were so small you couldn’t change your mind. We had a combination bedroom, living room, dining room, and kitchen. It was all together. I seem to have an aptitude for going in there and refurbishing these apartments. I knew it couldn’t be a full-time situation, but I like real estate . . . real estate was exciting. What I heard about real estate, what I read about real estate, was that the profitability could be very exciting. Sometimes you believe what you read. I just found that that’s something that we ought to do, particularly what motivated my venture into construction. I’ll tell you how I got started. I really knew nothing. I knew absolutely nothing. That made it easy for me to go into that business. If you don’t know anything, you can set the

⁵ The smallest apartments are referred to as efficiency or studio apartments in the U.S. They usually consist of a single main room which serves as the living, dining room and bedroom combined and usually also includes kitchen facilities, with a separate smaller bathroom.

world on fire.⁶ Nobody is going to know about it. I needed a job and through the Ben Rice was in the insurance industry. Marvin and Irving Goldstein, brother-in-law . . . he got me together with a fellow who was in the furniture business, a Robert T. Brock. Brock was quite a character. He was going to build ten units on Greenwood Avenue off North Highland Avenue. I only needed about \$10,000 to go [in]to this investment. I don't mean to be jumping around. I hope I'm not. I told Brock, "I really would be interested in going into this with you." The problem was I found out that I knew twice as much as Robert. Two times zero is still mathematically zero. Anyway, I didn't know things like you go for a construction loan before you get a permanent loan. We went to the bank, Robert Brock and Jerry Blonder. "We want a loan. Give us the money." We had a wonderful meeting with this fellow. At the end of the meeting, he said, "You're going to absolutely have to have a bond for this construction to build this upon." I said two things about that: "I don't know what that is, and I know I can't get it. So that's going to be a problem." We went on to . . . we heard about this law firm that controlled four banks in Atlanta. One was an old bachelor Roy Grinning. He was an old bachelor, a tough guy. We went in to see him. We were talking about doing these 10 units. He looked at me and he said, "You don't know what the hell you're doing, do you? I said, "You're right, Mr. Grinning, I don't. But I promise to repay the money." He said, "I'll call you tomorrow." I knew we weren't going to get the money. He called me the next day and said, "You got the loan."

Sandra: Amazing.

Gerald: He believed in me and he started my career. He started my career.

Sandra: What year was that?

Gerald: That was 1956.

Sandra: Did you do odd jobs just to try to make ends meet while you were getting all of this together?

Gerald: I was struggling with refurbishing the apartments at 1178 Piedmont [Avenue]. We had a pretty tough time. After a year of living there, Lois was expecting our first child. We moved into a duplex at Montgomery Ferry Drive and Monroe Drive. We lived there two months. I said, "Lois, I don't have enough money to pay the rent." The rent was \$125 a month. "I'm going to

⁶ Set the world on fire is an American idiomatic expression meaning to do exciting things or perform an outstanding feat, and win fame and fortune.

have to call the landlord. I'm going to have to call the owner" . . . they lived in Albany, Georgia . . . "and tell them. I don't want to call my folks. I promise to pay the rent in the next two weeks." After that, I was okay. Somehow or another I was able to make it. It was never easy though.

Sandra: Did Lois and you enter into this venture as a team?

Gerald: No. The reason for that—not that I didn't want to use Lois's talent—because I always knew she was talented. There was no doubt about it. Anybody that knows Lois would know that she's talented, whether it will be in marketing or whatever. In growing up, my mom and dad used to have a really rough time because my mom interfered constantly with my dad. There was never a dinner that I could remember where there wasn't a battle about this customer or that customer, or why did this happen, or why did that happen. I thought to myself—really not to be corny—I really want to be a great husband, a great parent. I don't want to do that. I don't want to include Lois. She has her own thing. Let her do her own thing. I could tell you one story about Lois. It's important to know what her character is. This is not jumping around. This is significant. In 1969 we had a very difficult year. We built almost 1,000 apartment units and the economy soured. We were struggling. There was talk about being put in bankruptcy. I said, "We're not going to go bankrupt. My God, we're too young for anything like that." I told Lois, "There are two contractors . . . our electrical contractor and mechanical contractor . . . they're in danger of going bankrupt because we can't pay our bills." Lois said, "We'll sell our house."

Sandra: That's character.

Gerald: That's character.

Sandra: Were there other Jewish individuals in this business in those years or were you . . . ?

Gerald: There were a few. It was Melvin Warshaw get a little bit. I don't think he did too much. In the beginning years there were certainly less than in later years. There are more now than there were in the beginning.

Sandra: What were the attitudes towards you by the non-Jewish community in this industry?

Gerald: It is very positive. You hear a lot of things from your subcontractors. They would think that when they say, "We're going to Jew him down," that it wasn't an insult. They didn't understand that. "You know you're not like the rest of the Jews." The only incident that I ever

had was with Georgia Power.⁷ Since then I've had a great relationship with them. We were promised electricity on a given day. I see the trucks roll by, but they don't stop in my community. I'll never forget the guy's name . . . Dusty Rhodes. I called Dusty and I said, "Dusty, these guys went by and they didn't stop. You told me that they are going to be here." He said, "Listen Jew boy, we gotta get there when we get there." I thought to myself, "You gotta get here sooner than you think." We had been on a trip in those days. Westinghouse and GE used to sponsor all of these trips to Europe. We had been on a trip with Joe Browder, who headed up Georgia Power at the time. He told me to call him if I ever needed anything. I never thought I would call him. I called him. I said, "I hate doing this. I've got to tell you this guy said what he did, and I resent the hell out of it." He said, "I don't blame you." He said if the trucks aren't there in 20 minutes, call me back. The trucks were there in 20 minutes. This guy came out—this Dusty Rhodes—to apologize. I told him to get the hell off my property. I have to tell you, in almost 50 years—it is 50 years—I never had another incident. You hear chatter . . . maybe things are being said, but I've never heard anything like that.

Sandra: Where were most of your apartment complexes located? All around?

Gerald: All around. Basically other states and cities, like in Birmingham, Alabama . . . some of this we've sold subsequently. Charlotte, North Carolina; Greenville South Carolina . . . we're presently in and not happy to be there, but we're there. Ocean Springs, Mississippi. We are in Charleston [South Carolina]. We are in Summerville, South Carolina. We've always been a low-key company. We haven't advertised a lot what we do and where we are. We've been all over the metro [Atlanta] area.

Sandra: Just for the purpose of the taping, could you just say the name of the company?

Gerald: It's been two companies. It's been Tempo and Focus Group. Those are the two companies that we've utilized. The name Tempo came from, I think, Michael our oldest, when we were looking to name the company. This is when we finally came up with the name we used, and to use different names. He said, "Tempo of the times." That made a lot of sense. We still own a lot of Tempo.

⁷ Georgia Power is an electric utility headquartered in Atlanta. It was established as the Georgia Railway and Power Company and began operations in 1902.

Sandra: During the 1950's and 60's when there was a lot of civil rights legislation going on, and fair housing and unfair housing practices, did you have to deal with much of that?

Gerald: Yes.

Sandra: Can you talk a little bit about those times?

Gerald: It was very difficult. First of all, I had a personal feeling about it. Secondly, I have a selfish economical feeling about it. In the beginning of those days, I can remember going into one of our communities. I won't mention which one it was. I walked into our office. I knocked on the door. The door was open. The resident manager was hiding because there was a black couple that had knocked on the door. There's nothing worse than having litigation, and there's nothing worse than not renting to people. I've always had the philosophy, "It's not black. It's not white. It's green." That's what pigmentation is all about when it comes to renting apartments. There were contemporaries that we knew in the industry that [were] doing all the wrong things, absolutely doing the wrong things. Not that we weren't sued a couple of times, but it got to be where there was a lot of blackmail that was going on too. That occurred, in my estimation, because a lot of people were doing the wrong thing.

Sandra: Like what?

Gerald: Refusing to rent to blacks . . . refusing to rent to minorities. I think that they caused themselves a lot of problems. I can tell you that . . . having a partner in many ventures that was black . . . he had a difficult time because we always wanted to do the right thing. [Unintelligible, possibly "what people living in our apartments thought, and everybody else thought to be a mass exodus."] What integrated housing in Atlanta was not legislation. It wasn't the lawmakers. It was MARTA.⁸ MARTA integrated housing. They used to bus in to our areas. Now they bus out. That's why there were a lot of people that were really opposed to MARTA, a lot of people in the real estate industry.

Sandra: Could it have ruined the rental of an apartment building? In those years—especially when it was so intense—if some white renters found out that you were renting to blacks, was there a lot of white flight?⁹

⁸ MARTA is the common term for the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, which was created in 1965.

⁹ White flight is a term that originated in the U.S. starting in the mid-20th century, referring to the large-scale departure of whites from neighborhoods or schools increasingly or predominantly populated by minorities.

Gerald: There were some. That was the ‘white thinking.’ There’s no doubt about it. That was the ‘white thinking’ that the place will empty out. I can remember on Buford Highway the first black couple that moved in. We thought, “Ooh, get ready because you’re going to have a lot of apartments that are available.” We probably had three complaints, and no move outs.

Sandra: What year was that?

Gerald: I would say maybe 1960. One of the most memorable things that Lois and I share together about the civil rights [movement] is our friend Herman¹⁰ was supposedly inadvertently asked into the Chamber of Commerce.

Sandra: Herman?

Gerald: [Herman] Russell . . . being black . . . there were no black members in the Chamber of Commerce in Atlanta. They had a big spread in *The New York Times*.¹¹

Sandra: What year was this?

Gerald: Early 1960’s. Ernest Vandiver was governor.¹² I don’t remember what year it was. Herman called me. He said, “I have six tickets for the event. I want you and Lois to come with me.” I said to Lois, “We are going to be the only white people with this crowd. I want you to understand that.” When we walked in . . . [we] walked into six blacks. That was pretty incredible. The next day Herman called me. He said that he was upset because we turned out to be the hero, not him. I’ve been very involved with the black community, particularly through my friend Herman . . . my associate Herman. We believe in fairness. I think that Atlanta has absolutely come a long way. We were in the ‘Dark Ages.’ You have to understand that. We were absolutely in the ‘Dark Ages,’ when people couldn’t sit at the luncheon counters next to you.

Sandra: If you remember some of those major events in Atlanta’s civil rights struggle with the . . . ?

¹⁰ Herman Jerome Russell (1930 – 2014) was born in Atlanta. He was the founder and former chief executive officer of H. J. Russell and Company and a nationally recognized entrepreneur and philanthropist, as well as an influential leader in Atlanta. In 1957 he inherited his father’s business and turned the small plastering company into a construction and real estate conglomerate. Some of the construction projects H. J. Russell and Company were a part of include Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, the Georgia Dome, Philips Arena, and Turner Field. Russell became the first black member of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce in the 1960’s, and later became only the second black president of the chamber.

¹¹ *The New York Times* is an American daily newspaper, founded and continuously published in New York City since September 18, 1851.

¹² Samuel Ernest Vandiver Jr. (1918 – 2005), was an American politician who was the 73rd Governor of Georgia from 1959 to 1963.

Gerald: . . . bombing of the Temple.¹³

Sandra: If you can talk about some of those, these things it would be great.

Gerald: I can't say I was there experiencing it. But I certainly heard about it

Sandra: How did it affect you . . . the Temple bombing or the picketing outside of Leb's Restaurant¹⁴ . . . all that?

Gerald: I remember being called for jury duty. The day I was called for jury duty was the day that this George Bright,¹⁵ who was accused of the bombing, was in court. When I saw this monster I couldn't believe it. Standing next to him. What are people all about? It just blew me away. I have always found difficulty in not liking somebody because of one's religion or color. I grew up in a town that was 90 percent Italian-Catholic. There was never a moment in my life, in my Port Chester life, that I ever heard anything derogatory. Nothing. I'm hopeful now that's where Atlanta is, that we're doing much better. I do try to discuss with Herman Russell the fact that more so, the [unintelligible "tally hatch yeah"] amongst the blacks seems to be more antisemitic than your blue collar. He just doesn't like to go there. He'll discuss anything else with me, but he won't discuss that with me. Why? I can't tell you. We got into a conversation one night at his lake home, with [his wife] Otelia [Hackney Russell]. I know this is not about Herman. This is about civil rights . . . to give you an idea. He's very comfortable with white people. She's not so comfortable. She's a lovely woman. She's a dear friend. She was telling us that she grew up in Muskogee] County which . . . I don't know . . . I think Columbus, that's near there . . . a very poor county. She was going to be a schoolteacher. She wanted that. That was her aspiration, to be a school teacher. They had a second-rate education. She and her brother had to walk to school. They were stoned by kids on the school bus. She hasn't gotten

¹³ The Temple on Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia was bombed in the early morning hours of October 12, 1958. About 50 sticks of dynamite were planted near the building and tore a huge hole in the wall. No one was injured in the bombing as it was during the night. Rabbi Jacob Rothschild was an outspoken advocate of civil rights and integration and friend of Martin Luther King Jr. Five men associated with the National States' Rights Party, a white separatist group, were tried and acquitted in the bombing.

¹⁴ Charles (Charlie) Lebedin was the owner of Leb's Restaurant in Downtown Atlanta. Demonstrations were held there during the Civil Rights Movement as the restaurant continued to be segregated.

¹⁵ Five suspects were arrested almost immediately after the bombing of the Temple in Atlanta. One of them was George Bright. One of the other men arrested accused Bright of masterminding the crime and of building the bomb. Bright was tried twice. His first trial ended with a hung jury and his second with an acquittal. As a result of Bright's acquittal, the other suspects were not tried. No one was ever convicted of the bombing.

over it, because the discussion started about [Louis] Farrakhan,¹⁶ and what her feeling was. I think even in the old time, for blacks . . . though they feel Atlanta's came a long way . . . there are still some difficult feelings.

Sandra: Do you think there was a . . . to blacks between whites and Jewish, or do you think it is just synonymous.

Gerald: I think that a certain segment of our Jewish population was the same as the non-Jewish population. I really do. I think your old time southerner . . . I think there were some feelings like that.

Sandra: Getting back to your own business. You started with one small apartment building and went into construction, and it kept growing. What do you attribute your success to?

Gerald: I think humility is a good characteristic to have. I had humility, and I have it today. Number one, would be good luck. If you don't have good luck, no matter how smart you are you're not going to be successful. Number two, I would think that the recognition of knowing that in building an organization, the greatest asset that you have is human resources. No one was more important to me than any employee in our company. Whether he was digging a ditch or whether he or she was sitting behind a desk. In fact, I'm probably the first one—I'm proud of it—that maximized employment of women. I thought that was a great idea. I think women do a better job—with due respect to the men—then men do. They're tenacious and loyal. Anyway, I think in building an organization that would be the next thing in line. I have employees that have been with me for more than 40 years.

Sandra: That's a wonderful legacy to you.

Gerald: You know I feel it is. I feel it is for them too because I couldn't do it if they didn't do it. I would say—and I don't know if we're there yet Sandy—that the great thing in my life . . . one of the great things . . . the greatest thing that I have is my family. That's the greatest thing I have. Secondly, our Jewish community, is second to none. They've come out for my family and me in every way. Thirdly, the relationships that I have with my competitors . . . those that are in the industry whether it's Post Properties or Lane. I can go on and name every one of them. I got to do more than most people. I was one of the four or five founding fathers of the Apartment

¹⁶ Louis Farrakhan, Sr. (born Louis Eugene Wolcott, 1933) is the leader of the religious group Nation of Islam (NOI). He has been criticized for remarks that have been perceived as antisemitic and anti-white. Farrakhan disputes this view of his ideology.

Association. We started with 19,000 units and today we're 350,000 units. I was president twice. I went on to be vice-president and then president of the National Apartment Association with thousands of members. I really get to do so many things. One of the big things that I've had in my favor, I had fun doing it.

Sandra: I can see that you love what you do.

Gerald: Yes, I really did the right thing in turning our business over to Michael [Blonder].

Sandra: That was my next question.

Gerald: Turning the business over to Michael is very difficult because when a father starts a business . . . that's even more difficult than just inheriting a business and then turning it over. It was the right time. I believed strongly in going out as a champion not a chump. I didn't want to do the things that I used to do anymore. I was just too involved, too hands-on. The business truthfully, was getting more and more stressful. I found the more I knew, the worse things were getting.

Sandra: Why was that?

Gerald: Just from the standpoint of the economy, the requirements by government, and the codes. Just different things that were permeating throughout the building industry. I mean that in a very loose sense. It was more and more difficult because building is difficult. It was his turn and his time because he has been with me since he went to the University of Georgia.

Sandra: Was that always your goal and his? Did he always want to come into the business?

Gerald: We never talked about it. Isn't that amazing? Now that you ask that question, Sandy, we never talked about it. I think that you're not supposed to assume anything but I think it could have been an assumption. You never assume, but I think it was an assumption.

Sandra: Did you ever worry about it?

Gerald: No.

Sandra: Because of your relationship with your father?

Gerald: No.

Sandra: Not wanting to go into business with him?

Gerald: I truthfully never thought about it. I knew that I was different than my dad. When Michael used to work with us summers and holidays and times like that, we had an understanding. When you saw me on the job, you can say hello, wave, and work and keep on

going. Most people didn't know that that was my son. He dug ditches and he was on all the heavy equipment. He did the dirtiest type of work possible, and he did it well.

Sandra: Did the girls ever want to go into the business?

Gerald: Leslie always thought that she should be president of the company . . . which is no surprise to anybody that knows Leslie. She's a great gal. Michael said she's very conservative and she probably is. But she felt she should be president.

Sandra: That's great.

Gerald: She used to spit out of the Lois's mouth and that makes her pretty special.

Sandra: You were talking about how business got difficult over the years. Was it difficult with some of these new codes and with legislation? Like fair housing . . . not fair housing, but handicapped? All the restrictions in all the ways that you had to start building to be politically correct for all these different groups . . . ADA?

Gerald: That's right ADA, it is difficult. Anything that's happened new starts in California. But it comes to Atlanta, eventually. And we have now all the activities that used to be in California. They're all here now, and a couple of the things that we went through. The first thing that I can remember is the adult versus family communities. It was a big battle. The adult communities didn't accept children, Okay. We got into a real hassle with the Legislature and all of that. And I remember being called by the AJC and I made a flippant remark. I was asked, "Isn't it true the reason you have adult communities is it's more economical to operate it than with a family?" I said absolutely, because you got to pick up more ice cream sticks. And you know, of course, the rest of the story. That's what got into the newspaper. The second thing with the handicapped, that's a very emotional situation. When you see people that are disabled you can't look at them without a heart. You can't only look at them in an economic fashion. They had a lot of empathy and sympathy in their favor. They were actually asking really sincerely too much. For instance, at one time they wanted in—I think—every 200 units to be 12 handicap units. You wouldn't get two people, maybe not even one. What we finally settled on—and it was good business—was rather than building them as handicapped, make them accessible. That made sense. What we did though the Apartment Association, we developed a very strong voice, if you will, particularly in the State [of Georgia]. We get a lot of support in the State. Less support from the city of Atlanta, you know, but they listened to us. And we try to be reasonable. I think we are so good that in

1975, when we started our organization, we wrote the first law for eviction and that sort of thing. I think there's been one minor change since 1975. So we've tried to be fair. What makes sense in our industry is for all of us to be professional, and do the right thing. That's why we have an association, because some of our members are less than professional. We do upgrade them through education and being actionnary and professional. So we've become a great industry. We were mom and pops for a long time, you know. Resident manager would have an office in her apartment. And she'd be at the swimming pool, if you needed her. We've come a long way. And we have some great people in the industry, right here in Atlanta.

Sandra: Do you miss the mom and pop days?

Gerald: Sometimes, yes. Sometimes it was a lot of fun. Because when I started I used to, I still do, pick up the cigarette butts. But I used to rent the apartments, collect the rent. Do all that good stuff. It was fun. I love people. I think that being in a people's business is very exciting because you have to be dynamic. Every day is different. You never know what you're going to wake up to.

Sandra: Do you think that's what you attribute some of your success to, to just the love of the adventure of it all? The newness that every day was something different?

Gerald: Definitely, and the love of people absolutely. I just I love people. I remember walking in one night to a function. I don't mean to sound egotistical but we used to have a lot of young kids, when they came out of the University of Florida, Alabama, and Georgia, moving in on Buford Highway. This is years ago. We would have a clubhouse and we would have parties and dances, and they would all come to them. I remember walking into a function at the Standard Club. I heard this applause break out, and I looked around. They were all my residents. That was pretty good.

Sandra: That's wonderful.

Gerald: Yeah, that was pretty good.

Sandra: Do you still own those apartments on Buford Highway?

Gerald: I own a lot of them.

Sandra: Now, that must be a big change for you to see the demographics of that?

Gerald: Only about a thousand percent. Pretty amazing

Sandra: The whole city, it must be amazing. And that's one of my questions.

Gerald: Well.

Sandra: How you've seen the city change in oh, 50 years that you've been in this business. What do you like about it and what don't you like about it?

Gerald: The most dramatic part of change is the increase of the Hispanic population. This is really dramatic. They started out really kind of like in a ghetto. Now they are really all over the city. It's made a difference. I think that's the biggest part of the change. I don't like, I just don't like, the way the infrastructure in the city is going. I think it should be better. We're a better city than what they're pretending to be about. Talking today and just driving around. When you recognize or realize the amount of new construction that's happening in Atlanta, its mind blowing. When you see two new high rises on the corner of Peachtree and Piedmont and the amount of condos. There are almost 6,000 condos being built in midtown. The city of Atlanta's pigmentation is changing now. When you look at Atlantic Station and see what's happened, and you're going to see the next location of an Atlantic Station is going to be the Lindbergh-Piedmont area. My friend George Lane is going to redevelop that whole area. And then **Norrow** is doing Lindbergh Plaza. And then the third redevelopment will be with the high rises that they're talking about at the park, with the mass transit. It really makes sense because you can't drive around the city anymore. You know, you just can't have cars and cars and cars. I think that we're . . . I really do think we are paying too much in the way of taxes and getting too little services in the city. I think Cobb County has probably done better than any area in Atlanta. This Sam Olens, who's from Miami Beach, has done a fabulous job. There's no other Sam Olens in any of these other counties. We need more young talented people that are in politics. We're not getting them. Why should people go into politics, if they're honest and decent? They're not going to want to steal money. They're not going to want to do the wrong things. Atlanta is probably about a 4.5- million metropolitan [area], which is pretty amazing, very amazing. I can only go back and think of when we owned the Paces in Buckhead. The rents are about \$2,000-2,500 a month. When I built the second community after Greenwood Avenue, I went to Briarcliff Road. I met a fellow by the name of Buddy Aldridge. His dad was the head of the Fulton County Commission for 25 years. He asked me what I'm building. I said I'm building these two-bedrooms, and I'm going to rent them for about \$125 a month. He said don't do that. He said you're going to go broke. You can't rent a two-bedroom in Atlanta for more than \$87.50. I

thought to myself now he's telling me this. I had that wonderful idea of putting carpeting in. I had pink and copper, tan and aquamarine, and all colors for appliances. I mean, it was terrific and it was successful.

Sandra: That's great.

Gerald: You look at things now; you look at the rents now. Buford Highway, at one time when we had all our kids moving in, a two-bedroom was like \$122.50 a month. Now they're paying \$600 and \$700. I meant to tell you this. This is probably the main reason that I got started in building. We built these 10 units and it was amazing. Somebody came along, about eight months after we finished. We built them for . . . I think it was . . . \$50,000. The land cost \$10,000, so it was \$60,000. This guy offered us \$75,000. I said to my partner Brock, "This is a wonderful business. We've got to continue." That gave me the impetus to continue.

Sandra: It seems like you're encouraging young people to get involved with the business because you set up a foundation?

Gerald: Yes.

Sandra: Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Gerald: I didn't set up a foundation. What I did was, as ex-presidents of the Apartment Association we meet twice a year. We eat too much, drink too much, and smoke too much. Sometimes we get these crazy ideas. I'd said that I thought to myself, "What a big mouth." But I thought to myself, "We are the best kept secret as an industry." Nobody knows what we are out there. We don't get people, unless we steal people from one another, or accidentally come across somebody. I want to issue a challenge to everybody around the table. I will issue a challenge grant of \$250,000. We want people to know that we offer an industry, that we are an industry, and that we offer education. We had no idea that it would take off the way it did. We knew that it was needed, though we all agreed to that. Anyway to make a long story short, we've been a huge success. We raised that money in no time. Now we're probably at almost \$3 million.

Sandra: And this is at the University of Georgia?

Gerald: Now this year we started at Georgia Tech [Georgia Institute of Technology—Atlanta, Georgia]. The classes are so successful. We have a young lady who is the prime motivator in this. She is dynamic, the kids love her, and that's what makes it so good.

Sandra: Is there a specific degree? What are the classes?

Gerald: There will be eventually. It's just starting. They're starting with various courses but they're working on developing a degree in this at the University of Georgia, not at Tech. At Tech we're finding out that we're getting seniors and postgraduates, or graduate students.

Sandra: What would the degree be?

Gerald: I think it's called something like Consumer Economics. The reason why Tech did it, was the gentleman that we've worked with there, said, "Look, our guys and gals know about designing buildings, engineering buildings, and building buildings, but they don't know anything about running buildings. You've got the formula. You've got the knowledge. You've got the talent." It's really working out extremely well. Our fellows in the industry are just standing up and putting forth the money that we need to do this.

Sandra: Changing demographics and some of these lower class people just starting out and some immigrants moving in. You must have at least . . . I think you might have that increased problem with evictions. That must be difficult. Is that the case or not?

Gerald: Yes, it's definitely the case. It's in different ways. We'll start with getting evictions served, which is very difficult particularly in Fulton County. They don't like to serve evictions. Secondly, in the Hispanic population, you'll find that they, more so than other minorities like blacks or African-Americans, pay their rent. But they will skip out on you. They lose their job and they're gone. If they're going back to Mexico, they're gone. No notice. Nothing. The difficulty we had really is with the African-Americans. It's very difficult, because there are a tremendous number of warrants. There's a tremendous amount of bad checks. Bad checks can be felonies. A lot of people don't like to prosecute a felony on a bad check, but it's a real problem. Collections are very difficult. The worse the economy gets, the worse the collections are. I can assure you that in most of Atlanta in the apartment communities, bilingual staffs are appearing. I really don't know of too many communities that don't have bilingual staffs anymore. Because you can't allow a resident to say "I didn't understand it. I don't speak English." There's lots of problems given the example of the most difficult problem with apartments. We can't have a bed check for every apartment. You can't have National Guard¹⁷ at every apartment. You can have 15 to 20 or more people moving into an apartment sleeping in shifts. We sold a community out on

¹⁷ The National Guard of the United States is a reserve military force and is part of the United States Armed Forces. National Guard units are under the dual control of the state and the federal government.

old Tucker Norcross Road. Before we sold it we added an extra 100 parking spaces. The demographics changed. We were probably 200 short. They don't mind sleeping . . . I'm not being demeaning, but they'll sleep on floors.

Sandra: Are just specific immigrant groups going to different . . .? Where are the Asians settling? Where are the Hispanics settling?

Gerald: Some of the immigrants are settling in ghettos like on Buford Highway. You certainly have the Vietnamese. You have a number of Koreans. You have Hispanics. I think in other areas they're pretty well disbursed. I don't think there's any heavy concentration. Maybe on the south side you may have some more Haitians than in other areas.

Sandra: On the other end, employment and with unions, have you had . . . is there a union in this industry?

Gerald: No.

Sandra: Have you had any kind of labor issues that . . .?

Gerald: No.

Sandra: That's good.

Gerald: The only labor issues you may have is if the market is so strong and so much is going on, it may be difficult or a little more difficult getting people. Other than that, there are no issues.

Sandra: Just to change our focus and to move away from the business aspect a little bit, talk about your wife.

Gerald: What can I say? We are going to be married . . . on December 27th will be 52 years. As I said before, I struck gold. I can tell you in more ways than one how Lois has loved and supported me. How she's always been there for me. Most of my days were really good days. I've had a lot of good days in my lifetime, and lots of fun and lots of good times. She would always support me. But when I had a bad day or bad whatever, she was the same way. She has always given me support, has always boosted me. What we get in Lois as a family, we get in my estimation: I get the best wife, our children get the best mom, and our grandchildren get the best grandma. I can't do any better than that. That really is Lois Blonder. She just exudes love. She is the most even person I know. Sometimes it's really to a point that it annoys me. I don't know how anyone can be so even. I don't know if it's good or bad, but it's one thing that I've noticed particularly lately. I've always known it. I've never thought about it. When she calls somebody to

do something, she's never ever turned down. I don't know of anybody that's turned her down. When anybody caller her, she's never turned them down either. She's the 'Hillel Knight.' Leslie and Lois were superstars. Leslie is a community superstar. Just like her mother, Lois. They are professional volunteers. They just have the charisma of everything that's really nice and everything that's Jewish.

Sandra: I agree with you.

Gerald: Thank you.

Sandra: In fact, when I was talking to Lois about you preparing for this interview, she gave you a wonderful complement. [She] said that you were the reason she could be involved in the community to such an extent because you always supported her in that endeavor. That's a nice testimony to both of you. Did you enjoy watching her being so involved in the community?

Gerald: Yes. Maybe if I had it to do over again, Sandy, I would do it differently. I would have participated more actively in the community. I told Lois—and she didn't always agree with me—that I wanted my participation to be in my business, and for my business. I thought it was very important to be there. We had a lot of employees. We had a big business going on. I just felt very strongly about not getting involved. I'm not a person that's good in meetings. I'm not a good meeting person. My friend—may he rest in peace—Norman Shaven used to tell me that a meeting that lasts more than 20 to 30 minutes is a bad meeting. I've tried not to have a meeting more than 30 minutes under whatever circumstances they are. To sit in some of these meetings and hear the same thing . . . I don't mean to be demeaning of anybody. To hear the same things repeated and just because somebody wants to hear himself or herself, or stuff like that, I wasn't good at it. Lois could do it. I couldn't do it and I didn't want to do it. I just felt that we've done lots of things in our business, and it's taken 20 minutes to do it. It wasn't a lot of conversation either. I have been thrilled personally when I know Lois is involved. My biggest thrill comes when, with her being involved, I know it's going to be well done.

Sandra: We all know that.

Gerald: Thank you.

Sandra: You did get involved, though. I know that you and she established a department at the Marcus Jewish Community Center?¹⁸

Gerald: Yes we did.

Sandra: Can you talk a little bit about that? If you can say the full name of that?

Gerald: It's the Blonder Family Department for Developmental Disabilities.¹⁹ First of all, both Lois and I believe in giving back. And not every professional in Atlanta agrees with me. Where we give back to, or how we give back, I always have a big battle with Lois. But we really try to give back. We've done some really neat things. We do have a granddaughter who is developmentally disabled. That started us on the path of thinking of what can we really do? I truthfully don't remember how we got involved with Susie Davidow,²⁰ except that Susie is absolutely the most wonderful human being and runs a great department at the MJCC. We've known Sammie Rosenberg.²¹ We know his parents and grandparents. His grandparents were friends with Lois's folks. It's just really become a personal part of our lives. We hope it will do more with the department and we think it's wonderful. When we see our granddaughter come back from Barney Medintz²² or from a trip with her peers or hear about programs, it's just incredible.

Sandra: That's great. That's really wonderful. I'd like to thank you, and Ruth would like to thank you for helping the museum so much. And the Blonder Heritage Gallery?²³

Gerald: That's another thing. I've really tried, believe it or not, to do things that Lois wanted to

¹⁸ The Marcus Jewish Community Center is the primary Jewish community center in Atlanta. It offers family-centric programs and events with programs, events, and classes that enrich the quality of family life. Their programs include preschool, camping, fitness and sports, Jewish life and learning, arts and culture and social and educational programs. It was named in honor of Bernard Marcus, one of the co-founders of Home Depot, who gave a major gift to the capital campaign.

¹⁹ The Blonder Family Department for Developmental Disabilities at the Marcus Jewish Community Center is dedicated to ensuring the financial security and welfare of children and adults with developmental disabilities with year-round social, recreational, and educational special needs programs that are open to the entire community. The Blonder Family Department for Special Needs was established through an endowment by Jerry and Lois Blonder.

²⁰ Susie Davidow is director of the Blonder Family Department for Developmental Disabilities at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.

²¹ In 1993, Sammy Rosenberg was hired by The Atlanta Jewish Community Center (now the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta) as the assistant director of the Developmental Disabilities Department. He assumed the responsibility for all programming pertaining to children and adults with developmental disabilities.

²² An overnight Jewish summer camp near Cleveland, Georgia in the North Georgia mountains. It was founded in 1963 and named in honor of Barney Medintz, a prominent Jewish leader in Atlanta, who died in 1960.

²³ Jerry and Lois Blonder endowed the Blonder Family Heritage Gallery at the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta.

do. I knew she would steer me in the right direction. I just didn't do it blind faith because it would be difficult for me to operate that way. We have a love for the [Bremner] Museum. Lois has a strong direction with it and it made sense to me. We're proud of that gifting.

Sandra: Thank you.

Gerald: We're proud of the job that you all do there.

Sandra: Thank you. We're getting close to the end. I would like to just ask you, since you've been in Atlanta for over 50 years, what do you see for Atlanta's future and for the Jewish community's future here in Atlanta?

Gerald: We're going to see tremendous growth. We are going to continue to see, and there's no telling . . . there's no end to the real estate development. Like Buckhead.²⁴ That hasn't even been touched yet. It's so minimally touched. You're going to see things go on that you couldn't even dream of. Some people say it's going to be a little New York City. That's far-fetched. I don't think in the next 20 to 50 years it would be a little New York City, but it's going to have that kind of growth. I think that the Jewish population will continue because I think we as Jews are comfortable here. We've found that we are a great community. We are a great community. I forget who it was that was telling me the other day that the Jewish community in Atlanta is so spectacular. It really is. When we came here in 1955, purportedly there were 15,000 Jews in Atlanta. I think that was already an exaggerated figure. I think that was too many at that time, but it sounded good. To think that there might be 100,000 or 110,000 that to me is amazing. Look what we do as a Jewish community. I think we're utterly fantastic. To have people in our community like Bernie Marcus,²⁵ Arthur Blank,²⁶ and Erwin Zaban²⁷ and—may he rest in

²⁴ The area located northwest of Downtown Atlanta with gracious homes, elegant hotels, shopping centers, restaurants, and high-rise condominium and office buildings. Buckhead is a major commercial and financial center of the Southeast, and it is the third-largest business district in Atlanta, behind Downtown and Midtown.

²⁵ Bernard "Bernie" Marcus (born 1929) is an American philanthropist and retail entrepreneur. He co-founded The Home Depot and was the company's first CEO. He served as Chairman of the Board until retiring in 2002. Marcus heavily contributed to the launch of the Georgia Aquarium in downtown Atlanta in 2005. Based mostly on the \$250 million donation for the Aquarium, Marcus and his wife, Billi, were listed among the top charitable donors in the country by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* in 2005. Marcus also funded and founded The Marcus Institute, a center for the provision of comprehensive services for children and adolescents with developmental disabilities.

²⁶ Arthur M. Blank (born September 27, 1942) is an American businessman and a co-founder of The Home Depot. Today he is known for his philanthropy and his ownership of the Atlanta Falcons. Blank is a signatory of The Giving Pledge committing himself to give away at least 50% of his wealth to charitable causes.

²⁷ Native Atlantan, philanthropist and community leader Erwin Zaban (1921 - 2010) was known by many as "the Godfather of the Jewish Community." After quitting school to help in his father's Depression-era business at age 15, Zaban built successful businesses worth billions of dollars and donated millions to worthy causes. He worked

peace—Sydney Feldman.²⁸ I mean, it's one after the other. We have a community that's had exciting individuals dedicated to Atlanta, dedicated to the Jewish community. I think that's going to continue.

Sandra: Is your Judaism important to you?

Gerald: Being Jewish is important to me. I'm not religious, I'm prayerful, you know. I'm very prayerful. I always have been. I don't know what made me or what motivated me that way. From the time that I was a kid, I'd say my prayers. That's very important to me. Being Jewish is important to me, but I'm not a synagogue goer. It's one of those things. We belong.

Sandra: Where do you belong?

Gerald: AA [Ahavath Achim].²⁹ We've been there for 50 years.

Sandra: . . . ?

Gerald: Temple Sinai.

Sandra: What is the legacy that you would like to leave to your community and to your family?

Gerald: I don't know. A legacy is a big statement. Without a lot of time to think about it, I would say that my legacy would be my honesty, my credibility, my decency, my love of family and my love of community. I would think that its things like that, characteristics like that, or feelings like that. I don't know what else to really . . .

Sandra: You mentioned early that you were so proud of the community's response to you . . .

Gerald: Yes.

alongside his parents to build Zep Manufacturing Company. Zep later merged with National Linen and became National Service Industries, a Fortune 500 Company. He donated and raised money for undeveloped land in Dunwoody that became Zaban Park, home of the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta. He donated money to the Jewish Home, for which the Zaban Tower is named. He helped create the homeless couples' shelter at The Temple which bears his name.

²⁸ Sidney Feldman (1921 – 2005) was a leader of many organizations, both nationally and in Atlanta. Among his many honors were the B-nai Brith Man of the Year, the Anti-Defamation League Abe Goldstein Human Relation's Award, Prime Minister's Medallion on the 25 anniversary of Israel, the National Council of Christians and Jews "Good Neighbor Award", and The American Jewish Committee Award for Advancing Understanding Among All People. He was National Vice President of United Jewish Appeal, President Emeritus of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and past president of several organizations including The William Breman Jewish Home, and The Marcus Jewish Community Center.

²⁹ Ahavath Achim was founded in 1887 in a small room on Gilmer Street. In 1920 they moved to a permanent building at the corner of Piedmont and Gilmer Street. Rabbi Abraham Hirmes was the first rabbi of the then Orthodox congregation. In 1928 Rabbi Harry Epstein became the rabbi and the congregation began to shift to Conservatism, which they joined in 1952. The synagogue moved to its current location on Peachtree Battle Avenue in 1958. Cantor Isaac Goodfriend, a Holocaust survivor, joined the congregation in 1966 and remained until his retirement. Rabbi Epstein retired in 1982, becoming Rabbi Emeritus and Rabbi Arnold Goodman assumed the rabbinic post. He retired in 2002 and Rabbi Neil Sandler is now (2015) the rabbi.

Sandra: I think then the phone rang and cut you off. I want to continue.

Gerald: I received that while I was in the hospital . . . when I was in the hospital, I guess this is about 18, 19 months ago, maybe more. Between the times I was in the hospital and then at home and then back in the clinic, I received more than a thousand cards and contributions from the community.³⁰ What can I tell you?

Sandra: That's a legacy.

Gerald: I have every one of them upstairs in my office. I have every one of them. I don't look at them now but I have every one of them. I just think that I'd had a wonderful life. At lunch Herman said, "We've had a wonderful life. If we go now you know we've enjoyed it." I said, "I'm not leaving." That's the way I feel about life.

Sandra: Good for you.

Gerald: You know what? There's no other place. I like Atlanta.

Sandra: Good for us.

Gerald: Yes. Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely.

Sandra: I would like to thank you. It's been a real pleasure.

Gerald: Thank you. You've been most kind.

<End Disk 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS

³⁰ Jerry Blonder died on February 15, 2006, from complications following a two-year fight against leukemia. He was 74 years old.