MIRA AND HOMER WICKENDEN

Your parents were amazing people. They both were recognized publicly for their work – your father was honored for his work with Blue Cross and your mother received the Medal of Merit for her work with nursing.

Yes, my father was even invited to Europe because of his reputation. I think he was asked there to explain the concept behind Blue Cross. He started that work in ’32, and so I think he was in Europe to talk about what he was doing. His work on National Health insurance came ten years later. The programs were evolutionary. Health insurance and then Social Security came along. In many ways, much as they were not fond of Roosevelt, it did mesh with the New Deal. Mother knew Frances Perkins, Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor.

And so then about 1940, I think my father got together with a consortium of others who were wanting to establish a retirement insurance company for people who are not covered by Social Security. And because nobody in the nonprofits – hospitals, Boy Scouts, United Way – they were not covered, and Social Security was never designed to cover them. So then then they were constructing this insurance company, National Health and Welfare Retirement Association, and it took a lot of time to get the insurance qualifications and all of the licenses, and all of the rigamarole you have to go through, the red tape that it takes to establish a company like that. It took about five years. It was not easy to do because it was going to be big.

*Where did your dad get the vision and the skills, the organizational skills to accomplish this?*

He had a master’s in social work. He graduated from Denison as a philosophy major, much to his father's distress. And then he went on to the University of Louisville and took a master’s in social work. Then he went to Cleveland and worked with the Community chest. He met mother in Louisville. She had come there after a couple of other jobs after the war, when she came back from France. She was working for the Visiting Nurse Association. I think she was running it after she had come back from the war and working with Hoover. Two years in France, and then I think she was a school nurse or something for a while till she went to Louisville and they both worked in the same building. And then he pursued her. She had a career in mind, but he said you could do that and this too. In those days that was very unusual to say. You can do it all. Then she moved to New York and was head of the Children's Bureau. He finally ended up coming to New York and ended up working for the United Hospital fund. They were both really in the social welfare field. Anyway, he went to Cleveland and then he ended up actually chasing mother to New York (*laughs*). She wasn’t having any and of it, but he just was gonna have it or bust. So, then he went around the world and ended up in New York and worked for the United Hospital Fund. That evolved into Blue Cross.

*Did he talk about it over dinner ever, with your mother or your sister and you?*

Oh yes, I'm sure they talked about it, talked a lot. Mother had done a project for the United States Public Health Service about poverty in the depression in the early part of the 30s. After he started Blue Cross, she worked for a while, and then she finished that project. So that I don't think she was working in 1937. And she would just do projects on and off.

Did she inspire him? Did she say “Homer, you're doing such a great thing for the nation,” or did they each have their own separate interests?

They would have very reasoned discussions, and they were very equal. You know, I don't recall her pushing him. I don't think she had to push him, because I think he was determined on his own, and he didn't push her because she was determined too. So, they were very equal. Somebody asked me one time about mother and the National Nursing Council in World War Two and said, well, was your father feeling a little uncertain about this, kind of jealous? I said no. Believe me, they were equal. They were totally equal. They were really about as equal as any two people could be ... in terms of ambition, capability, determination, and vision. You know they both shared that. So, dinner conversations were, as I grew older, interesting. A lot of it, though, was about us, my sister and me. A lot of laughter. They both had a good sense of humor. Yeah, Daddy was a terrible punster. Terrible. And the phone would ring, and we’d just tell her “Say no, Mom.” Because somebody was calling around to ask her to do another volunteer job, since she wasn't working.

Your mother, Mira, was really a very unusual woman, wasn't she, in her ability to get things done, to take charged? And end to be recognized by the President for the work she did. What was it like being the younger daughter of such an amazing woman? Did you know that she was amazing?

Well, I knew that she was very productive and that she was doing important work. I never questioned that, and she was extremely organized. Oh, she add lists of her lists, and everything was in a notebook with a list. And if she had to be in New York for some kind of a meeting, she'd be all set with her hat gloves on and me on her back on the living room floor before she went on to the train station. We always had Karen as a backup. Otherwise, they couldn't have done what they did because they were both traveling here and there.

Mother travelled mostly to Washington or to Battle Creek to get money for the National Nursing Council. She kept asking for money because it was a quasi-government agency, National Nursing Council. It was set up by the Secretary of Defense for the Surgeon General, but they didn't bother to fund it much. Yeah, minimally they ran it, so they said. Well, you know, it's a fine line. So, it was really up to the Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek to fund a lot of what she was doing. Yeah, so she went to Battle Creek a lot.

She went a couple of other places. I remember she came to California once. I think she went to UCLA because the School of Nursing the Dean was a good friend of hers. She came on a DC3. Coughing all over the place and no air conditioning. And Daddy never got out here until he came to visit. So, she was here in California long before he was.

*So, was she very charismatic and very social? Did she reach out and network?*

Oh, mother was very social indeed. Amazing. Yeah, she knew many people and had many friends. I remember she belonged to the Nondescript Club, which is a group of women who gave presentations. Everybody took a turn, but it was really just an excuse to socialize.

*Any other stories about your family life?*

One thing I didn't discuss was the story of the house. Dad had it designed by his friend architect Jim Bevan and built in Eastchester in1927in a new neighborhood in which they were to build new schools. Then the crash happened, and the Depression began so the schools never got built. Ann started school in New Rochelle, and I went to nursery school there. When Ann was in fifth grade and I was ready for kindergarten, they enrolled us in Windward, a private school in Mamaroneck a few miles up the Hutcheson River Parkway. We carpooled with Norman Rockwell's two older boys, Jerry (Jervis) and Tom and another boy Charlie Watts who was one wild Indian!  Charlie came in a chauffeured limousine in which we all sat in the back seat. Charlie drove the chauffeur nuts, so the poor man had to roll up the window between the front and the back. It was always a wild ride in Charlie's limo which scared me.

Windward was a very progressive school, we called all the teachers by their first names and Mother arranged for my teacher to let me take a nap after lunch, so she didn't have to make an extra trip to fetch me at noon. I loved it because sometimes the teacher would take me on a field trip.  I remember two, she took me to a cider mill and the roundtable to turn the trains around.

The parents were also very involved and one year the parents put on a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Gondoliers". Daddy sang in it along with Mary Rockwell while Mother and Norman sat and watched the rehearsals A number of the parents became good friends, friendships that lasted over many years.

After two years, they decided to move to Bronxville where the schools were very good, so they bought a lot that that had been s part of a large estate called Crow's Nest. Dad had Jim Bevan revise the plans for the house and build it again in 1935 on the new lot.  We then went to the Bronxville public school, Ann into sixth grade and me into real kindergarten. We could walk to school, so no more car pools.