

Interview Subject: Helen Sir Kaplan

Date Recorded: 7-7-12

Location: MDPL office, Art Deco Welcome Center

Date of Birth: 6-29-30

Helen Sir lived in Hell's Kitchen in New York City with her parents and two siblings. Her father was persuaded to visit Miami Beach by an uncle who had established a business here. Her father came back very excited and decided to sell his store and move the family down. Helen was seven when they moved here.

She remembers her early experiences going to elementary school with children who were very poor and came to school barefooted. She shared her lunches or sometimes gave them money to buy lunch. She also remembers walking in a neighborhood close to the Bay between 5th and 12th Streets where there were a lot of houses (probably apartment buildings) that said "No Jews and No Dogs allowed." She remembers asking her mother what the signs were about and her mother told her those people were crazy.

Her mother had a black domestic who would eat at the table with her. She had to leave by 4pm because of the curfew of workers having to be off the beach by sundown.

Later they moved, and Helen went to Central Beach Elementary and had a quite different experience. It was more middle class and Jewish. She describes the beautiful school and the dances in the afternoons.

She talks about the "snowbird" children who came down for a couple of weeks or months each year. She says she was "snotty" to them even though she was assigned by the teacher to welcome them and see to it they fit in.

Her father built an Art Deco building but when WW2 came the rents were frozen so that wasn't so great.

She talks about her husband's unionizing activities. (Joseph Kaplan)
She heard him speak and his message was to survive in America is to have a union.

She talks about Cesar Chavez staying at their house when he came to town because his life was endangered. He had a lasting influence on her daughter.

During the integration of Ida Fisher School, her husband was asked to head the PTA because he was a strong leader and could mediate the crises that happened frequently at the school. He would investigate claims and keep the peace.

She talks about racism and how many who came from the northeast had grown up in mixed neighborhoods and had no problem mixing with different cultures and races. She saw a big difference in the people who had been raised in the South.