

## Interview with Denise Courshon

**Kathy Hersh:** This is for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. Today is October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018. We are in the home of Denise Courshon, and we are going to hear all about how she was born and raised on the beach. I did say today is the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, 2018. OK, so, Denise, your family has a long history with the beach. Can you sort of go up the family tree a little bit and tell us when it started?

**Denise Courshon:** OK. Both of my grandparents moved down from where they were living in the 30s due to the Depression. They were both in business. My father's father in Chicago, Illinois, he owned movie theaters and bowling alleys. People were jumping out of windows and worried about money, so he wasn't getting enough business. My other grandfather owned a general store in Oak Hill, West Virginia. It was during the time that the mines were running out of coal, and the miners were getting black lung disease, so he decided he'd pack up his family and move down to South Florida, where there was a lot of opportunity. They both settled on Miami Beach around the same time, which was in the mid to late-30s.

**Interviewer:** Did they tell you stories about what that was like coming here then?

**Courshon:** They did.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember some of those?

**Courshon:** I do remember some of the stories. My mother's father was Jacob Bloom. He liked people to call him Jack, and I called him Pops or Popsie. He would tell me stories about how there were a lot of Vaudeville shows and reviews in little clubs on South Beach. They had entertainers that would come down from up north; comedians, and singers, and dancers, and a lot of them spoke in the Yiddish language, which was very prominent among Jewish refugees who came, you know, before or after the time of Hitler and World War II. They used Yiddish as a way to communicate. My grandparents, who, both sets of my grandparents spoke fluently, they used it so that, they wanted to talk about subjects they didn't want the grandchildren to know about, they'd speak in Yiddish.

**Interviewer:** Were those subjects about hard times and why they left, or?



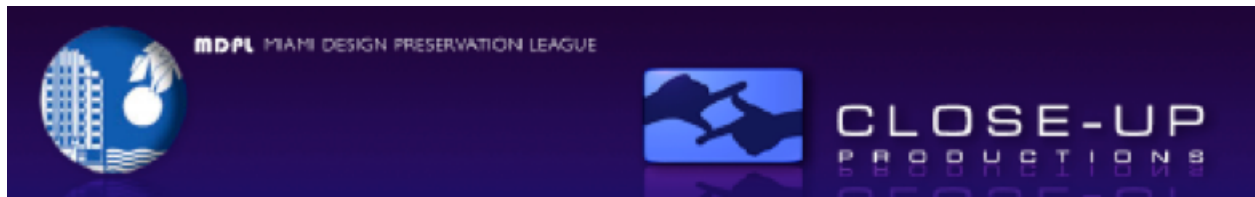
**Courshon:** They could have been. I never learned to speak Yiddish myself. We also found out they had code words for things they wanted to talk about that they didn't want the children to know. My brother and I coped down the words, and looked things up, and went, "Oh my."

**Interviewer:** Was their experience positive in coming? Challenging? They made it work for them. How did they do that?

**Courshon:** Well, I think both families, my father's and my mother's family, saw that there was tremendous opportunity in moving down to South Florida. First of all, you couldn't beat the weather. You know, winter in South Florida was a lot more appealing than winter in Chicago or the Appalachian Mountains. Secondly, I believe that South Florida was starting to go through a real estate boom. Developers were coming down, and Henry Flagler had already put in the railroad system. There was a lot of building and growth, and they both thought that that would be a wonderful entrée to new businesses. That's what both of my grandfathers, who did not know each other at the time, but decided to focus on real estate, and some development, and things of that nature.

**Interviewer:** They bought a house. You were showing me pictures of the house, the one set of grandparents, and you spent a lot of time there. Tell us about some of your memories of the house, and the gardens, and the street, and the milieu.

**Courshon:** OK. Well, the first house they rented, I was not familiar with that house at all, because my mother was in, I think she was in like sixth or seventh grade, so obviously I wasn't around. It was a very small what they call an Art Deco-style house, with porthole windows. It was on the water on Pine Tree Drive, but my grandfather complained about back pains, he called it lombago. Two years later, they decided to move up the street to Alton Road, and they bought a house, which is the house I remember as a child. They actually owned that house, probably for about 16, 17 years, so I had many fond memories of playing in the back yard. My grandfather had a green thumb, so he grew a lot of beautiful fruit trees, and he was always out there. We loved it when he'd pull off the bananas and give us the bananas, and the oranges, things like that. We took a lot of walks on Alton Road, which had sidewalks, which was a big appeal at the time. Lots of families were out walking. He would take my brother and I for walks after dinner. I remember that very fondly and looking at all the houses and the, you know, plants and trees, and really enjoying it.



**Interviewer:** Did your mother talk much about her childhood growing up on the beach?

**Courshon:** She did over the years. She was a young, very young girl, and she had an older sister that she had to contend with. They went through Ida M. Fisher Junior High School, and then Miami Beach Senior High. She actually met my father in the sixth grade at Ida M. Fisher Elementary. I think that was their last year, no, excuse me, it was a year later in seventh grade at Feinberg Middle School. My father took one look at her, she was in a class of his, and she had blond hair and big blue eyes, and he just flipped. He had his mother call my mother's mother, and she said, she introduced herself on the phone, and she said, "My son Jack would like to ask your daughter Delores out on a date.". My grandmother's reaction was, "She can't go on a date. She's too young. She's only 12 years old, 12-and-a-half years old.". My father's mother said, "Well, what if I went along as the chaperone? He'd like to invite her to a movie in the afternoon and out for ice cream soda afterwards.". My grandmother said, "I'll have to ask Mr. Bloom and call you back.". He said it would be OK as long as, you know, my father's mother would come along. They went on the date, and I think afterwards, my father was smitten with my mother, but she was a little uncomfortable. I think she was too young to go out with boys, so she told her mother she didn't trust him. She didn't want to go out with him any more on dates.

**Interviewer:** Is that when he came to the parlor and listened to her play the piano, or is that?

**Courshon:** Oh, no, no, no. That was my.

**Interviewer:** The other side. OK.

**Courshon:** Grandmother's generation. Yeah, yeah. To answer your question, both my mother and my aunt were very popular girls in high school. Growing up, they had a lot of friends, a lot of dates. She talked about the football parties, and the sorority parties. They were also very, very good students, because my grandfather, even though he didn't have a formal education, didn't go to college, he always stressed education. They were straight A students. They were cheerleaders, but they were also straight A students. Both started college at young ages. They skipped a grade and started college at 16, went to Duke University.

**Interviewer:** That's an impressive place.



**Courshon:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Where did you go to school on the beach?

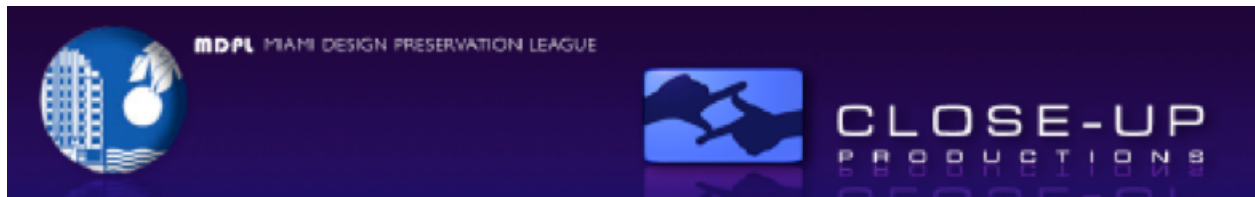
**Courshon:** Born and raised in Miami Beach. I went to, first I started out at Biscayne Elementary School, which is near they call North Beach today We live don Stillwater Drive on Miami Beach. Then after my brother was about 5 years old, my mother had another baby that turned out to be twins. Our little house on Stillwater Drive was too small, and so we had to move. We moved up to the south end of the beach, to Sunset Island. I went to North Beach Elementary School, which is, both schools are still there today. Then Nautilus Junior High and Miami Beach Senior High School where I graduated.

**Interviewer:** What was it like going to Miami Beach High in the 60s?

**Courshon:** Oh, very, very interesting. First of all, it was a large Jewish demographic in the high school. I think that after World War II, a lot of the soldiers came to Miami Beach for R and R before they were going home to wherever their homes where, you know, Cleveland, or Louisville, or Chicago, or Boston. I think they liked what they saw, you know, the beauty of Miami Beach and the warm weather. A lot of them married after the war, settled here, raised their families. When I went to high school, it was a primary Jewish population. We knew a lot of the families because we all had sports and activities after school, and the beach was what they called a small town in those days. My parents wouldn't buy me a car because they wanted me to work for things. I remember my mother giving me bus tokens when I was 14, 15, and saying, "Take the city bus. Just make sure you're back before dark.". There was really no crime, very little crime. It was a wonderful place to grow up.

**Interviewer:** Academically, what was it like there?

**Courshon:** Well, that's an interesting question, because I think the whole persona of Miami Beach in those days, and this was the 50s and early 60s, was on resorts, fun in the sun, hotels, nightclubs and hotels. My father's family was in the hotel industry in Miami Beach. I don't think there was a high level of intellectualism in Miami at that time, compared to other cities, like my cousins who grew up in New York, or Boston, or Chicago. After school, I remember going home with friends and we'd put on our bathing suits and jump in the swimming pool. Well, we would get around to studying eventually. I



have great memories of school, you know. A lot of fun, a lot of friends, and activities, but not overly working for my grades.

**Interviewer:** Miami Beach High has graduated a lot of interesting people who have gone on to high places, shall we say.

**Courshon:** Oh yes.

**Interviewer:** Was there anyone in your class that stood out as a super achiever?

**Courshon:** That's a good question. I can't say a name that would be recognizable. However, I know that Beach High has claimed Andy Garcia who's a, you know, very prominent, well-known Hispanic actor now. Another gentleman who actually owned this house that we live in, and owned the house across the street, who became a prominent record producer was Desmond Child. Desmond produced music for Ricky Martin, John Secada, Nestor Torres. Even when Ricky Martin was a young boy and he had a band named Menudo, that was all done by Desmond, who went to Beach High. There was a singer named Gloria Goff who was a little older than me, but she was really beautiful, and she had a major singing career.

**Interviewer:** We met her, and she was in soap operas too, I believe.

**Courshon:** Yes, yes. There was another gentleman, a year older than me, who became a producer in Hollywood. I don't think he's with us anymore, but his name was Sandy Theef [Phonetic][14:27]. I don't know.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever, did you go away to college, or?

**Courshon:** I did. I did. I wanted to go away to college. I didn't want to go to school in Florida because, I guess because I had such a huge family, and I had lots of cousins, younger, older. We always had playmates, you know, because besides having friends, we had, there were four girl cousins, myself and three others, all born within a month of each other. We all grew up together, so we always had people to play with. Because of that, I think I wanted to do something different and go far away from home. I ended up going to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, which I loved, because I experienced the change of seasons for the first time, and that was beautiful. My dad's family was still primarily out in Chicago, so I connected with my cousins in Chicago, yeah.





**Interviewer:** Did you make a deliberate effort to come back and stay here, or did you wander around, or what?

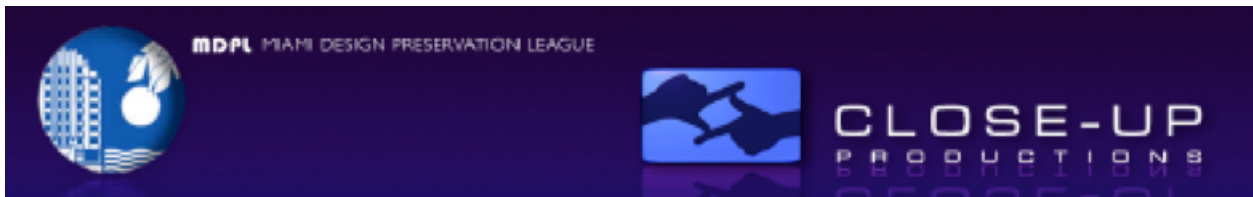
**Courshon:** Not really. Once I went off to college and I discovered independence for the first time, and no real rules for the first time, I thought, "Wow, I think I'm on to something. If I go home for the summer, I'm going to have the curfew and, you know, the rules and all that.". I was a bit of a rebellious kid you could say. I went home one summer and after the curfews and the rules, I said, "I'm not coming back home anymore.". I had a boyfriend, and I stayed up there. I went to summer school in summer in Madison, which was beautiful. I'd go visit my cousins in Chicago or New York. I was very independent.

**Interviewer:** Well, what brought you back here

**Courshon:** Well, it's interesting. I married my boyfriend years later, and he was in the Marines. This was during the time of the Vietnam War, so we lived on the Marine base in Jacksonville, North Carolina. He was from Providence, Rhode Island. He was very close to his older sister who lived in Boston. We figured that's where we would settle, and that suited me just fine. He found out when he got out of the Marines, because he wanted to apply to law school, eh was still like six electives shy of getting a college degree. He had gone to the University of Miami. He said, "Well, we'll have to go back so I can finish up the University of Miami.". My parents were thrilled, because by then we had a baby girl. I think my parents were kind of wheeling and dealing for ways to keep us in South Florida and that is eventually where we stayed, and settled, and raised our kids. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** How had it changed? How has it changed, that you've seen? You've had a long time here.

**Courshon:** Yes. Well, even in the five years I was away, because I left for college in '66 and we came back here in 71, I think. I had seen changes. All of a sudden, developers were starting to go out to areas of the city that had been, I'm thinking of Kendall specifically, that had been mostly tomato fields, and strawberry farms, and things like that. They were starting to build housing, and that's where we bought our first house, because, you know, we could afford to buy there. Then my father and my uncles had gotten involved in some development in an area called Plantation, which was a new area in Fort Lauderdale, saw a lot of opportunity there.



Eventually, that's where my husband, after he finished his credits, my dad said, "You know, Ron, you'd be great in development.". He said, "OK, I don't think I will go to law school in Boston. It's cold and it's a lot of work.". He got involved with them as a developer. Now, I have to say the city has done a 360 turnaround, and it's a totally different city than it was when I was growing up. I do love the changes. I love the diversity. This is my home. I love traveling. My husband and I travel a lot. I have to say, I am still very happy being a Floridian and living here full time. My husband and I, all of our kids moved back here, eventually, and started their families here. It's a very nice place to be.

**Interviewer:** They're really third, fourth generation?

**Courshon:** Yes, yes, you could say that. From my grandparents down to our grandchildren, absolutely. We're trying to tell them the stories and give them the backdrop of the history so they'll tell their children. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** You said that when, that both sets of grandparents spoke Yiddish.

**Courshon:** They did.

**Interviewer:** When they came. They eventually learned English?

**Courshon:** No. Three of my four grandparents were born in the United States. Only my mother's father was European. His wife, my mother's mother, was born in Baltimore. My father's parents were born in Chicago, Illinois. Well, actually, my grandmother was born in Sag Harbor, Michigan, but grew up in Chicago. They, I guess they, I assume they learned Yiddish from their parents, because none of their parents were American-born.

**Interviewer:** Your grandfather, who was Lithuanian, Jacob Bloom.

**Courshon:** Bloom.

**Interviewer:** How did he learn English?

**Courshon:** Well, he learned it because, as I had mentioned, he was motivated to learn. He moved to the United States with an older brother and a younger sister, but he already had three older brothers living and working here who were speaking English. He saw a picture of this beautiful woman he wanted to meet and go out with. He was about



20 years old and she was about 17, but she was American-born. He was very motivated to learn English. I think from night school and his brothers, he picked it up pretty fast. Yes.

**Interviewer:** You're involved in the art scene here. Could you talk a bit about your work in the arts on Miami Beach, and historic preservation work?

**Courshon:** Yes, yes.

**Interviewer:** What you're engaged in, what.

**Courshon:** Well, I think I always had a tremendous interest in historic preservation, because I grew up in and around areas that were either historically designated or later because so. For example, the Art Deco District. You mentioned Barbara Capitman, who was one of the pioneers. Both of my grandparents owned hotels in the Art Deco District. My father, one of his jobs in high school was he was a bell captain in one of the hotels. The hotel was called The Breakwater Hotel on Lummus Drive, which became Ocean Drive. I had a fondness for that, and I joined Dade Heritage Trust when I moved back to Florida with my husband in 1971. I thought the early work that they were doing was remarkable because they were trying to save some of these beautiful buildings that were destined for the wrecking ball. They taught me how to do historical site surveys, which I did, in some of the buildings.

**Interviewer:** Did you work with Barbara Capitman?

**Courshon:** Not directly. When Barbara was doing her thing in the Art Deco District, in those days I was working for an interior design firm. One of the designers was a young, very ambitious man who became her partner in selecting the design colors to do the buildings and the interiors over to keep them viable, historically viable. They ended up naming a street after him.

**Interviewer:** Leonard Horowitz?

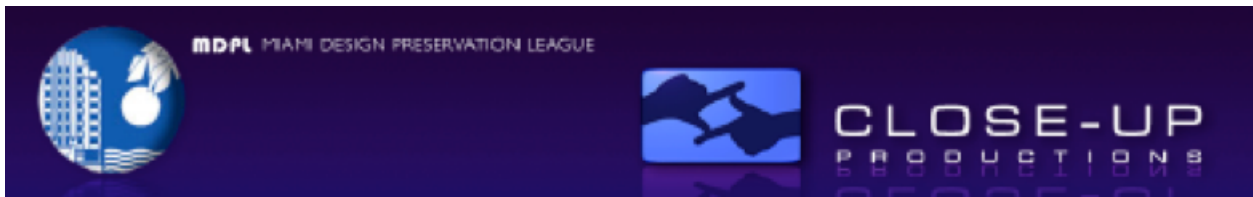
**Courshon:** Leonard Horowitz.

**Interviewer:** You knew him?

**Courshon:** Very well. Very well.

**Interviewer:** OK. Tell us about Leonard.





**Courshon:** Oh, he was a buddy of mine. He was just like this big, chubby teddy bear kind of a guy. Just a lot of fun to be with. He had beautiful taste, and he had a tremendous interest in the Art Deco area. The woman that owned the firm that we both worked in, her name was Carole Korn. It was Carole Korn Interiors. Carole was very excited about the projects in the Art Deco District, so she gave Leonard carte blanche to take as much time as he needed to work with Barbara. They produced some beautiful collateral material about the district. I'm not entirely sure, but I think Barbara and Leonard came up with the original idea of the Art Deco Weekend, and promoting that as the vehicle to put the area on the map. You know, it might be one of the larger Art Deco areas in the country.

**Interviewer:** I think it is the largest.

**Courshon:** Yeah, yes.

**Interviewer:** It was fortunate that Carole Korn allowed him time to work with Barbara.

**Courshon:** Absolutely.

**Interviewer:** Because that was a very productive partnership.

**Courshon:** Absolutely.

**Interviewer:** He, with the color scheme, was key. In fact, that's what one of the videos is about, how color saved South Beach.

**Courshon:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Interviewer:** That we use with elementary students.

**Courshon:** Oh, that's wonderful.

**Interviewer:** Were you involved then, in helping save some buildings?

**Courshon:** Yes. Not any of the Art Deco hotels, but they sent me out, they trained me to do historical site surveys. As a volunteer, because I was in the organization, they sent me to a hotel on Ocean Drive, that was originally Lummus Park. It was a large hotel that had become an apartment house, and it was in terrible disrepair. People were living in it that maybe couldn't afford the rent. You know, I



don't know if I should use the expression, some drifters or people who just kind of settled in there. I wrote it up, and I wrote up the beauty of the architectural features of the hotel that actually had on the top of the hotel what had been a planetarium tower so that people could go up and look at the stars at night.

**Interviewer:** It had telescopes and everything?

**Courshon:** Well, I don't recall seeing a telescope when they brought me up there, but that was explained in the history. I did the whole write up about the property, and the building was called the Netherland Palace. The Netherland Palace became the property that the designer Gianni Versace bought many, many years later and put millions of dollars in it and turned it into the famous Versace mansion.

**Interviewer:** What about your involvement with, you told me earlier you were involved with Miami Ballet. Can you tell me some more about that? Weren't you involved with an art museum, or?

**Courshon:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Courshon:** Yes. Well, I think my career was always in the arts in some aspect. I was a fine arts major in college and studied painting, and studio design, and sculpting, but it was hard to get jobs with that kind of major after college. After my kids were older, I went into the fashion industry, and worked in that arena doing public relations and marketing for large retailers like Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus, Burdines Stores. After 20 years, I was getting a little bored with it, you know. Fashion was nice, but it wasn't the be all, end all. I was approached by Toby Lerner Ansin, the founder of Miami City Ballet, to join the company. I couldn't quite figure out what she wanted me to do there because I had stopped ballet when I was in high school. There wasn't any fashion aspect to the ballet company. She told me she thought it'd be a great fundraiser. I told her I didn't know anything about fundraising. She said, "But you were born and grew up in Miami Beach, and you know all kinds of people, and I think you could help tell our story.". She worked on me, and I finally agreed to do it. I started working at Miami City Ballet when it was still on Lincoln Road. It was in an old building, you know, spread out in little nooks and crannies. The smartest thing they ever did was take the storefront on the ground floor and turn it into the ballet studio, and with big picture windows, so every



day people could walk by and peep in, and see these beautiful young dancers and marvel at it. They performed at the, what was then the Jackie Gleason Theater. They had a beautiful story to tell. She hired Edward Villella to become the artistic director. When I was a young teenager, my parents would take me to New York to see Edward Villella dance with New York City Ballet. At the time, he was the most celebrated male dancer in the world. It was too good an offer to pass up. I worked there nine-and-a-half years as head of development, although I had very many different titles over the years, but basically was in charge for raising the money to put on the beautiful ballets, and have them design beautiful costumes and just make it happen. I wasn't alone. I mean, we had about 14 people in our department. We worked very closely with Edward and Toby, and it was a wonderful experience. I really loved every bit of it.

**Interviewer:** How did they manage to snag Edward Villella to come down here? Eduardo.

**Courshon:** Well, apparently Edward and his wife Linda had had a little daughter, Crista Villella, and he was, I'm not entirely sure. I think he was working for a ballet company in Upstate New York. I think they came down, they interviewed with Toby in the spring, and I think they also saw the absolute beauty of the area and thought, "Well, it might be nicer to come down here than be in Upstate New York.". She was also willing to put up the seed money to start the company. At the time, it was about \$1 million. It was from her husband's foundation, Edward Ansin, who owned Channel 4. I think it's Channel 4. It's still on the 79<sup>th</sup> Street Causeway. That was more impetus. Basically, she said, "We want you to start a company, but a company with a twist. Something that will make it a uniquely Miami company.". Edwards and Toby were totally on the same wavelength. She introduced Edward and Linda to her friends, who loved the idea, and loved the idea of getting not just a man who had been a famous ballet dancer, but he was a celebrity as well. He had danced for the Queen of England. He danced in the White House. He danced all over the world. It was the celebrity aspect that was very enticing. I think he came up with the idea to bring in a lot of Hispanic dancers, because by then, this was, OK, I want to say in 1985 or '86. By then, we were on our way to becoming a bilingual community with tremendous influence from the Latin sector. He was smart enough to draw on that. That also added a lot of spice and energy to a brand new company.



**Interviewer:** It was enticing for him to come and start his own company.

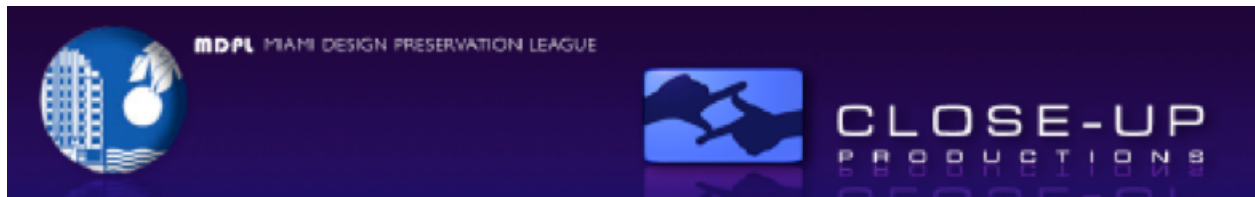
**Courshon:** Absolutely.

**Interviewer:** What is his background, culturally? Do you know?

**Courshon:** Yes. Edward came from an Italian family. Grew up in, I think it was the Bronx or Brooklyn. His father was a truck driver, very macho truck driver. I think his mother was a housewife. His older sister was dancing ballet, so she had to take him with her, you know. She didn't have a babysitter. He liked it, and he wanted to take ballet lessons. She said, "Absolutely not. Your father wouldn't permit it." You know, being a macho Italian man. He begged, he begged, he begged, and finally she said, "OK, but don't tell your father." He had a lot of athletic prowess, and he loved it. He took to it like a duck with water. He became a really good dancer. The way they finally let the dad know, when he was a young teenager, they invited him to come to a performance. I think the sister was still dancing, but Edward had the components of becoming a star. The father was surprised but he was blown away by the talent. That's when he said it was OK, you can continue to pursue dancing, and he did, you know. He became a protégé of George Balanchine, who was a young, brilliant choreographer and dancer from Russia who took over New York City ballet at the time.

**Interviewer:** Then you have, you were involved with the museum, I believe, or with.

**Courshon:** I joined, because I so love the arts, I was on the board of the Bass Museum, at the time that Diane Camber was the director the museum. Prior to that, when I was a child in the 50s, the 60s, and I had a younger brother, my sisters were just babies, so they don't count. My mother would take us to the Bass Museum that also had a library component. We'd go to the library there that was attached to the Bass Museum and look at the artwork. That was very interesting. Diane, when she took over, wanted to take it beyond that. She saw the beauty of the building and the necessity of building up a permanent collection. By then I was probably in my 30s and married with kids living in Miami Beach. A lot of very prominent people on the beach joined the board. Jose Valdes-Fauli was on the board. Caroline Miller, who was a big real estate person. Sue Miller, who was her sister-in-law, she was on the board. It was a very exciting time. I was on the board for eight years, and we raised the money to allow a new wing to get built for the Bass Museum, so it was a wonderful experience.



**Interviewer:** What was it like raising children on the beach?

**Courshon:** I think it was a very idyllic time, although the times had changed. My kids were growing up in the 70s and early 80s. There was a little more crime, so I didn't allow them to take the city bus with tokens as I was allowed to do as a kid. It was still a very nice time. They went to the park after school, the Muss Park. They had activities there. We belong to Temple Beth Sholom, where I grew up, and that was across the street from North Beach Elementary School that they went to. They had activities there, and they had nice friends. It was an idyllic kind of a childhood, but the times were a changing. That was the truth.

**Interviewer:** Are you still a member of Temple Beth Sholom?

**Courshon:** I am happy to say I still am. Actually, my husband and I both served on boards at the temple over the years. We're still active, and now our kids and grandkids belong to the temple. It's a very nice affiliation. There have only been three head rabbis in all the years the temple's been in existence since the early 40s.

**Interviewer:** That's amazing.

**Courshon:** It is amazing and unusual.

**Interviewer:** Very unusual. A lot of continuity there.

**Courshon:** A lot of continuity.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel that it's a community, or has it gotten too large? Or is it something vital that you feel connected to?

**Courshon:** The temple? Oh, I feel they have done a remarkable job of building up the congregation and staying very vital over the years. That's because Rabbi Kronish, who was the original founding rabbi, when he started it, I think he was a fairly young man in his 30s, married, with young kids. He really went out in the community and knocked on doors to get young Jewish families to join the temple. He was willing to try all kinds of programs and things that would interest people. It's where Judy Drucker, who became a famous impresaria on Miami Beach, started the Great Artists Series, which eventually segued into the Concert Association. She was a member of the temple and an opera singer. She had this great idea which she





proposed to Rabbi Kronish, and he said, “Go for it.”. She started bringing in people like Yo-Yo Ma, and Itzhak Perlman, and Beverly Sills, and people like that. She really started to open up the cultural window to Miami Beach, which was exciting. I think even to this day, the new rabbi who has just recently taken over, Rabbi Gayle Pomerantz, she has got progressive ideas and wants to make our congregants more aware of what’s going on in the world today with the environment, with politics, with Judaism in general. She’s created, she and Rabbi Glickstein, the recently retired Rabbi, they have created just a wealth of programs for the congregants. It’s a wonderful community to be involved in.

**Interviewer:** They have a preschool.

**Courshon:** They have a preschool. Now they even have very ambitious plans to extend it beyond the preschool up to the eighth grade. Now, don’t ask me how far they’ve gotten with that because I’m not really up-to-date with all the details, but it’s pretty ambitious.

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