



## Interview with Rachelle Nelson

**Kathy Hersh**

S1: 00:00

This is for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. My name is Kathy Hersh. I'm interviewing Rachelle Nelson and today's date is January 29th, 2020. So, Rachelle, let's talk about your childhood, and what are some of your most vivid memories of growing up on the beach?

**Rachelle Nelson S2:**  
00:20

Well, first of all, I grew up on Bay Harbor Islands and at the time that I grew up there, it was not a wealthy island. It was hard-working, upper-middle class, primarily Jewish. There were lots of empty lots. We all played in the streets. We played hopscotch which was something the kids played when I was a kid. We were all outdoors until our parents screamed, "It's time for dinner." It was a very different world. We'd come home on our bicycles from school. I'd ride to school on my bicycle, which was Bay Harbor Elementary. It was a very small community and everybody knew everybody. And everybody knew everything about everybody's life too. So it was a very nice atmosphere. I went on to Nautilus junior high school where my musical talent started to come out more. Not that they only-- not that they hadn't been there as a child, they were but by the time I got into middle school, what they call now, or junior high, they had a band. And I played in the band, I played a little bit in the orchestra. I tried that but all the other violinists were so out of tune, I couldn't stand it so I stuck with the band. It was easier. And then on to Beach High, there were some really interesting years. At the time that I went to school, they had started something called the quinmester. So you could go to the school in the summer as well as you could go during the school year and then you could graduate early. And so I actually



graduated in December of my senior year. I didn't go through the full year.

S2: 02:00

Beach High seemed enormously big to me in those days. It was kind of scary at first but I went in the summer and I started by playing in the band with my flute. I was already trained as a classical pianist since I was a little girl, on Miami Beach, and also in junior high school, I started playing guitar. So I played a little bit of guitar. I never thought of myself as a singer when I was in school. I saw myself more as an instrumentalist and I hoped someday of teaching in a high school such as Miami Beach High with my own classes and I thought how wonderful and thrilling that would be. There was no idea at that time that a woman could become a cantor. Well, it didn't exist.

S1: 02:51

Tell us about the Jewish aspects of your childhood.

S2: 02:54

Well, they were very, very rich. My mother and father were very involved in the Synagogue world. I was brought up conservative, going to Temple Menorah as a child where I had my Bar Mitzvah. They also had a membership at a temple called Ner Tamid on Miami Beach. So they went there and I went to Menorah. My grandmother was an incredible musician, Lillian Nelson, may she rest in peace. And my grandmother would come over almost every Friday night for Shabbat dinner and she would go over to the piano and play beautiful melodies. My parents would sing, mostly in Yiddish and I picked up a lot of my love of Jewish music right there as a little girl, listening to them at the piano.

S1: 03:36

Who was your piano teacher?

S2: 03:39

I had a few. The one that I had mostly as a child was a woman named Florence Kutzen who lived in North Bay Road. And so after school, once a week-



- I don't remember how-- oh, I took the Metrobus at Beach High and I went to her home for piano lessons. At the end of my lesson, my grandmother would be waiting outside because she lived on Lincoln Road and what was called the Morton Towers, I think it still is there. And she would meet me outside and my dad would pick us up from the office because he worked on Miami Beach on Lincoln Road and we'd all go home for Shabbat dinner. And that was my first piano teacher. The teacher that captured the understanding of my soul more than anybody else was an incredible woman in Coral Gables, who also has passed, named Peggy Neighbors Erwin. Peggy was a one-of-a-kind piano teacher. She saw the whole you. She didn't just see your fingers or hear the wrong notes you played. She heard the notes you played correctly and she made me feel so wonderful as a musician, as a pianist, that she inspired for many, many years after.

S1: 05:06

You said that you didn't expect to be a singer or you didn't think of being a soloist. You felt more like an instrumentalist. But do you think that the voice was in there, it just hadn't come out yet?

S2: 05:20

I had a sweet little voice. I didn't know how to really use it. I just played guitar and played folk songs and I got into University of Miami and sang in a very, very sophisticated choir that traveled all over the world called the Sunshine Celebration. It was made up of 18 exquisitely great musicians who were multi-talented, who played so many instruments and I got to be in that group for four years which was incredible. And in there I discovered that I had a voice and I needed to take it seriously, the way I took my piano and flute and guitar seriously. So I started to take more time to



sing and have a serious vocal teacher at the University of Miami and then in my second year of school there, my roommate told me that the Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music in New York City which was what its name was then-- it's now called the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music. But it was called Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music, that they had opened their doors to women and this excited me because I had been playing Jewish music my whole life. And so I applied to school and I got in. But I'm going to back up a little bit. During my high school years, my aunt, Judy Drucker, had started a small concert series at Temple Beth Shalom on Miami Beach. And because of her past and involvement in the show business kind of world and the upper world, she had a lot of good friends like Robert Merrill and Richard Tucker. These were her friends. And Roberta Peters, I remember. And I remembered that these were the first three people I think that she ever brought down-- I can't guarantee it but they were three of the very first people she brought down to sing at Beth Shalom and the crowds went crazy.

S2: 07:17

And so she started adding more to the series and more. And finally, it got so big that she moved it to TOPA which is the Theater of Performing Arts on Miami Beach, and there began her big series. Well, when she did that, she needed somebody to take over her music classes. She was a music teacher after school at Beth Shalom. She was teaching Jewish music and on Sunday mornings and she asked me if I wanted it. So she gave me a pile of books and I went home and I learned a ton of music and I became the music teacher at Beth Shalom.

S1: 07:52

That's fascinating.



- S2: 07:52 It was. And I stayed with that job until I got into college, the University of Miami, and then I was offered a better position being a cantorial soloist at Temple Israel of Greater Miami. And with, may he rest in peace, cantor Jacob Borenstein. And that's where I went and got my next real sense of Jewish liturgy.
- S1: 08:21 Going back to your aunt Judy Drucker, did she ever entertain any of these people? So [inaudible] and were you around at those times?
- S2: 08:30 Yes, she was unbelievable this way. Everybody wanted to come down here to Miami and be on her series because she took care of them completely, whatever their needs were. Some of them stayed in their home, some of them stayed in hotels. She made dinners for them, she picked them up, she schlepped them from one place to another. I remember Pavarotti wanted to go horseback riding. She took him to a horseriding ranch and the horse thought he was a little too heavy. He broke his tuchus, his tush bone and he had to cancel his concert. I remember that story. But yes, she had always had artists in her home and when I was in school in Manhattan at Hebrew Union College, whenever she'd come, she would invite me to join her. So I have another great Pavarotti story. So she had made plans to take me to the home of Richard Tucker to visit his wife. I think that he had already passed.
- S1: 09:36 Tell us who Richard Tucker is.
- S2: 09:37 Richard Tucker was one of the greatest baritone operatic singers this world has ever known. One of the most richest, beautiful voices. Known all over the world, tons of recording throughout the United States and Europe. And this was one of her friends,



Richard Tucker. So she told me she was going to take me to his home to have dinner with his wife and I don't know who else was there. But at the last moment, the plans changed and so she called Pavarotti who had an apartment at the Ritz-Carlton in Manhattan and he said we should come to his apartment for dinner. He was going to make dinner. So we went to a bakery and we ordered a cheesecake and the guy that packaged up the cheesecake asked if he could write his name and phone number on the bottom of the cake in case Pavarotti needed an accompanist. So he wrote his initials-- I don't know if they ever got in touch but we got to the door and the door swung open and he said, "[foreign]." And this huge man with the scarf around his neck and the smell of pasta boiling in the kitchen, because he brought his own foods from Italy, welcomed us in. And we had a wonderful dinner with him and a young woman named Madeline-- I don't remember-- I think she was his personal secretary but we all had dinner together and then I went to the piano and I played Broadway shows and he sang.

S1: 11:15

And he knew the words?

S2: 11:15

He knew all the words. I didn't remember them but he knew them.

S1: 11:19

Wow [laughter].

S2: 11:22

Yeah. Now, today, of course, we could just pick up our iPhone and get all the words off it but in those days, you had to know your lyrics.

S1: 11:28

How is it that he and your aunt came to be such good friends?

S2: 11:33

I think it was just that she had brought him down for a concert and she was so personable and she treated these people-- remember, these people had





really lonely lives. They still do. They travel all the time from city to city, country to country, state to state. They often don't know a single soul where they're going, except their cellphone to call someone. And she made them feel so at home. She met them at the airport personally. She took them to their hotels. She ordered the right foods for them. She arranged to have them picked up and entertained the whole time they were here. She catered to them in every single way possible and they wanted to come here. They loved coming to Miami Beach, Florida, just because of Judy Drucker.

- S1: 12:24      Wow, I'm sure there are dozens and dozens of stories you could tell.
- S2: 12:30      There are, but I wish she was around to tell some of them. But she just lit up the beach. She created an artist series that literally was the first and only one that Miami Beach had and she was the first to bring Leonard Bernstein, Rostropovich was the great cellist. Anyone you can name in the classical field, she brought down to Miami. She was it.
- S1: 13:02      I still hear people talking about Pavarotti on the beach. I mean literally on the beach. That must've been quite an undertaking.
- S2: 13:13      The story-- the only one that I know where I was there live was when he sang in that massive tent. Is that what we're referring to? Yes, it was like an arena. It was filled with thousands of people. Thousands. There wasn't a seat available on Miami Beach. She threw one of those huge concerts and I remember being there. And I often got to sit in the third and fourth row in these concerts because she had a ticket for me.
- S1: 13:42      So you think that she was a major influence in the



direction your life took?

S2: 13:48

She was one of them. My parents were certainly the strongest and my grandmother because I was with them every week. And they gave me a love of Jewish music that really touched me. She gave me opportunity. They gave me the warmth in the soul. That was the difference. She opened the doors for me to have opportunities to work and to start using this trade but they were the ones that really nurtured my soul.

S1: 14:21

And was the Jewish life on Miami Beach in those days centered around the temple? Or were there other institutions or organizations where people got together and celebrated the music and the movement and--?

S2: 14:40

I think the synagogues were the main places where people came to hear concerts. The Jewish concerts were there. I really believe the synagogue held the key and of course, around the time before my Bar Mitzvah, we had a massive influx of Cuban Jews from Cuba and suddenly the beach changed a lot. It was full of the whole new kind of life that those of us living on the beach, we didn't quite get it. And of course, these Cuban Jews who came, they were very-- this was overwhelming to them, living in Miami Beach and they stuck together with their own. So you felt a sense of groupies. It's changed over time but for the most part, the Cuban Jews who came stayed within their families and within their own culture and spoke only Spanish. And most of us didn't know a word of Spanish or even understood the dialect. If you wanted to hire someone to clean your home, you usually hired a Southern Black woman. That's the people that you hired. You hired Black people who were living in Downtown Miami and those were the people you hired. You rarely found a Spanish speaking person





working for you. That came later.

- S1: 16:03      Were there attempts made to try to include the Cuban Jews into the culture, into the [setup?], that you were aware of?
- S2: 16:12      No, I really don't. They really stuck together and they all went to the same temples and they went to Temple Menorah because they were accustomed to a more traditional. Some to Temple Ner Tamid, but I didn't see them in Beth Shalom or the Reform Synagogues. They were in the conservative synagogues.
- S1: 16:34      And they had cantors?
- S2: 16:34      Oh, sure.
- S1: 16:36      In Spanish? Or Hebrew?
- S2: 16:38      Yes. Well, not in the beginning but yes, over time they brought their own hazzans. Cantor, Hebrew, it's hazzan. They brought their own hazzan with them or they came over looking for jobs. So it was a very different culture that suddenly came to us.
- S1: 17:01      Now, when you entered the school in New York, the cantorial school--
- S2: 17:10      That's right.
- S1: 17:11      Were there a lot of women there at the time?
- S2: 17:13      So that's a great question. So 10 years before I came, the very first woman entered the school, I think, in '75. Her name was Barbara Ostfeld. She was the very first woman to become a cantor.
- S1: 17:32      In the US?
- S2: 17:34      In the Reform movement, in the US. That's right. And so she was in a class of men. When I came, it was a very strange class. It was a class of four women, all women. No men. Just four of us who



would study together for the next five years. And one dropped out and then there were three of us and eventually, the three that were in the class-- sorry, there were three of us. The other two in the class continued on and I think that they bridged them together with a later class and something happened to me. After my second year of school, I started having severe stomach issues called ulcerative colitis and I was very sick. So I took a year off from school and I came back to Miami. I got healed and I went to work for Temple Israel of Greater Miami during the year that I was home. They had just gotten a new rabbi, Rabbi Haskell Bernat and they had an assistant rabbi, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin. And Jeffrey knew me from school and so he recommended that I work there. So for the year that I was home, I worked at Temple Israel. And then at the end of that year, I reapplied back to cantorial school and went back to finish the program but I, now, was with a different class. I was not with my class. I was with a new class.

S1: 19:07

And it was mixed, male and female?

S2: 19:08

This was a larger class and it was mixed male and female. About 10 of us.

S1: 19:12

Did the males have any attitude about females in the class?

S2: 19:17

No, no. We were treated completely alike. I think there was always a little preference over the men because, at that time, the music had all been written for male voices. So hearing a woman interpret traditional cantorial music was odd at that time. It's not now but it was then. So I think that we tried very hard, the women, to try to develop that sense of what we call davvening, praying, like a male. But we weren't men and we were-- but the world outside was very excited about inviting



women in. Some synagogues know, they were more traditional and they couldn't imagine having a female cantor but for the most part, it was really exciting. So I went back to Miami after I graduated cantorial school to work full-time at Temple Israel of Greater Miami. And there were some people there-- because they had a wonderful male cantor for so many years. Some people there that really had a hard time figuring me out and my voice. But for the most part, I was welcomed and there were articles of me all over Florida. People wanted to interview me left and right because it was such a new thing. It was so exciting.

- S1: 20:37      So you were the first female cantor in Miami-Dade County and in Broward?
- S2: 20:43      Reformed.
- S1: 20:44      Reformed. In the reformed--
- S2: 20:45      The reform. That's right, there was one conservative female cantor that graduated later on and came from the-- or maybe around the same time but she came from the conservative movement. I don't know quite how she got her degree but she was very well educated and a lovely human being.
- S1: 21:07      Of course there would be no female cantors in the Orthodox.
- S2: 21:11      And never will be. At least not in my lifetime, nor do I believe it'll be-- I just believe that they're doing the best they can. They have women minyans but they're separate. I think women in some places can read from the Torah but for the most part, no, they'll never be leading them and I'll explain why. There's a belief that a woman's voice is very alluring and very sexual and that a man can't concentrate on



prayer if he's hearing the voice of a woman. And therefore, that's one reason. Another reason is her menstrual cycle. She's considered unclean at certain times of the month and therefore, you can't have her unclean up on the bema with the Torah. So there's reasons why, for the Orthodox, I don't believe we'll ever see that. But there are orthodox female women who have broken off and created their own little groups which we call a havurah and they actually are able to pray and to do everything in a group of women. But never do I believe they'll be chanting to men and women together. I don't think so. Listen, nobody thought that I would be sitting here right now with you. So who's to know what will happen? But I don't think it'll happen in my generation.

S1: 22:38

But you think it could possibly happen?

S2: 22:39

Anything's possible. Anything's possible.

S1: 22:43

At the time that you were at Beach High, was it predominantly Jewish?

S2: 22:50

It was predominantly Jewish and predominantly White. I immediately got into the acapella choir which I loved and then into my second year, my junior year, I was the president of the acapella choir. What happened at the end of my first year of school there is there was a terrible riot. They had been forcibly busing in Black children. There were also some very, very high class, highly educated Black children that were there of their own free will. Their fathers were principals of schools. They were the cream-- whether they were White or Black, they were the cream of the crop. But there was also another group that was forced busing. And they came into this school and they saw these wealthy upper class to rich Jewish White kids and they really resented it. And one morning, I got to school



before class and I was at my locker and suddenly, the doors spread open at the end of the hall and a rush of Black children came rushing through the hallways destroying everything in sight, beating people up. And that was the beginning of a new time.

- S1: 24:08      What year was that? That was your freshman year, you said?
- S2: 24:11      Oh, boy. It wasn't my freshman year. So it probably was around '75 or '76. Let's see, I graduated-- I always get my dates mixed up. Do we have when I graduated Beach High? Let's see... Let's see, I went to the University of Miami in 1979. Yeah, so it was between '75 and '76 that this happened.
- S1: 24:45      That's not that long ago, actually.
- S2: 24:47      No. No. Now, I've been back to the school. It seems to be-- it's completely natural.
- S1: 24:55      Were you personally--
- S2: 24:57      Injured?
- S1: 24:58      --injured?
- S2: 24:59      It's interesting, my cousin Andy, Judy Drucker's son was on one side of the hall and I was in the middle of the hall and he got his nose broken. I started running and slipped and fell to the ground and then someone-- or a couple of people trampled on me. Nothing was broken. My pocketbook was gone. My books were scattered everywhere and I had a bruise that took up half of my arm but I had nothing broken.
- S1: 25:29      And what happened after that? How did the school administration react to it?
- S2: 25:35      I don't remember. I don't remember if it was more security after that. It's all a fog to me. I just think we



went back to a regular day of school and maybe these kids were brought in and possibly suspended. But beyond that, there was no extra security or anything like that in those days. It was just, "Okay, it happened once. It won't happen again."

- S1: 25:59 Do you think that was the correct assessment or that was just wishful thinking?
- S2: 26:06 Well, I don't remember any other riots like that.
- S1: 26:08 Do you remember any tension in the classroom between Black and White students.
- S2: 26:13 There was always tension, yes. Yes, especially if-- I mean it depended on the students. I mean, I was with a lot of Black young people in my acapella choir but they were phenomenal because these were kids that wanted to sing, where they were in the band. They were kids that had some direction. It was the troublemakers that had issues and I think thievery started to get a little more-- talking back to teachers started to get a little more-- I wasn't there long enough to really see what happened to the school after I left.
- S1: 26:55 But it was disturbing?
- S2: 26:58 It was disturbing but from all the years since then, all I've heard is that Beach High is still an excellent school. Will it ever be that Beach High? No. No, that was like a private school for Jewish kids. But it still turns out great students.
- S1: 27:19 Describe that private school for Jewish kids? Were the teachers-- the parents' involvement?
- S2: 27:25 The teachers were almost all Jewish. Parents came to everything. There were school plays. The drama department was outstanding. The band was outstanding. Some of the kids were geniuses. You





could already see that they were going to go on to great things. There were kids that were already writing for the orchestra, writing for the band, writing for the choirs, doing great dramatic plays. There was a pamphlet that came out every year with writings in it from students. I think it was called The Embryo. I think it was called The Embryo. I had something actually published in it once and it was just on a level that was, today, college-level. Really, it was different.

S1: 28:14

Do you think that the traditional emphasis on education from the Jewish culture maybe had something to do with that? That expectations were high.

S2: 28:26

Of course. Every Jewish kid was a genius. Don't you know that [laughter]? And that hasn't changed. Here at Temple Beth Am we have a day school. Every child's a genius. And the expectations are very high for all of them. It's very hard to even have an after-school program because so many of them are involved in dance, in theater, in ballet, in gymnastics, basketball. There's so much going on for these kids, it's ridiculous. They have very little free time. But I think that Jewish children have-- Judaism has always held education to the highest of standards and it's an intellectual religion. It was cultural at its roots but it was also highly intellectual. You will never find any religion with as many books and as many intellectual readings and as many people that have come out of Judaism-- you won't see any culture that's any smarter.

S1: 29:40

So in order to be good at your job, I would imagine you have to have a wellspring of a deep-rooted spirituality that-- you may know the music, you may have other attributes but where does that come from?



S2: 29:57

That's here. It was given to me by God. It was nurtured by my parents but I've always been a very spiritual person and I truly believe, now more than ever, as I'm growing older, that God holds my hand and walks by my side. God is so with me and I feel God's presence in everything I do and I am so blessed to have God. I went through lots of years where I don't even remember thinking much about my spirituality. It was about getting through and getting the best grades and being the best cantor and the best singer. But as you grow older and wiser and you now suddenly really see your years not lasting forever like you did when you were a child, you really are blessed if you can bring God into your life more and more. And then you never have to be alone and you know that you can get through anything. And that's the road I'm on right now. I am on a road with God so that I can be a healthy, loving, I hope, pray to God, grandmother one of these days. My daughter just got married of my twins and raising my twins here at Beth Am was-- they were diaper trained and they were toilet trained in this place because I was working all the time.

S2: 31:30

But I just believe that as I've grown older, I've realized that if I really want to enjoy my older years and make them golden years, which most people say they can't be, the way to do that is to see your cup half-full, not half-empty. And the way to do that is to let God in and then you're never alone and you never can say, "I'm lonely." You're not lonely because you've got this spiritual friend with you all the time, watching you and guiding you. That's the journey I'm on at this time in my life. So I sing now to God in a way I've never sung before and I look into people's eyes and into children's eyes and into my own children's eyes like I never did before. I



thought I did. I thought I gave it all but now I'm really beginning to get it, that what we call a sacred journey in Judaism, it's not just a journey, it's a journey taking God with you and doing wonderful things to make a difference in this world. And then it becomes a sacred journey, not just a journey and not just about self and about being a victim and all the things we hear from people every day. It's really a sacred journey and I know this sounds ridiculous but I've just started that journey. I thought that at this age I'd be ready to slow down on the journey but I'm not. I'm ready to take the journey and go in a new direction. I don't know where that's going to take me but I'm going somewhere.

S1: 33:08

You feel that?

S2: 33:09

Oh, yeah. And I'm going to touch new lives as this journey at Temple Beth Am will soon come to an end where I'll become the [inaudible] cantor instead of the senior cantor. I'll be able to go out into the community and do a lot more Mitzvah work which means good work, to help those less fortunate and I'll be able to hopefully be more creative and write some piece of music. I don't think I've mentioned it once in here but I'm a composer and my Jewish music is sung all over the world.

S1: 33:45

That must be very gratifying.

S2: 33:47

It is. It is. And that I can write something new that maybe I can bring to different synagogues, telling my life story through music is probably my next journey. So growing up on Miami Beach was like growing up in a large synagogue. More like a JCC because everywhere you went was Jewish and you went swimming at the beach and everyone was Jewish and you went swimming in the pool and everyone was Jewish. You went to concerts,



everyone was Jewish. You knew everybody and that kind of community helped to create, for me, a real strong sense of self and I had a lot of confidence when I left Miami Beach, that, when onto college and then onto cantorial school, that I could bring something enriching and different than anybody else could bring. And having gone to all the concerts on Miami Beach that my aunt had brought to the Arts Center-- not the Arsht Center but to the Arts. And just growing up amongst people who had a history-- I mean, I grew up amongst people who were the architects of Miami Beach. I grew up with one of my congregants, Sophie Gumenick whose family created the Gumenick Chapel at Temple Israel of Greater Miami. I grew up on Miami Beach at Temple Beth Shalom with Rabbi Kronisch, may he rest in peace, and my singing on the bema there and being the soloist at the confirmation class, all of that stuff brought me to where I am now. So as they say, "Beaches, dynamite. Beaches, dynamite, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba. Beaches, dynamite. Beaches, dynamite."

S1: 35:48

[laughter] Perfect.

S2: 35:50

Okay?