

February 6, 2015 – Sonia Schorr Sloan speaking with archivist Kelsey Duinkerken at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

*Guide to abbreviations:*¹

KD: Kelsey Duinkerken

SS: Sonia Schorr Sloan

GS: Gilbert Sloan

{CG} cough

{LG} laughter

{BR} breath

{NS} noise

- partial words

-- restarts

KD: OK, so.

SS: My name is Sonia Schorr Sloan. Uh, I live now in Wilmington Delaware, uh, with my husband Dr. Gilbert Sloan. Uh, we've been married uh fifty seven -- eight years and have two sons and five granddaughters and three great-grandchildren. And, um, I'm really delighted to come and tell a little bit about my history. Um, I, I guess you want me to start where I went to college, you don't need all that beforehand, or do you?

KD: Oh, you can do a short background of before.

SS: OK, well. My mother was a teacher, my father was a businessman and a Democratic, uh, representative. Um, I grew up in a house filled with a lot of liberal thought and um action. A grandmother who marched with the suffragettes, so, it's not strange that I {LG} went into a man's world at one point. Um, and I had a wonderful, happy, happy home life. And I have a sister who's two years older and a cousin who's three years older and we all lived together, and he's now a retired orthopedic surgeon, and it was uh his urging and his instigation that I came here to Jeff. Uh, he was at Penn and he met a professor there who was coming here to Jefferson. I went to Syracuse University. I graduated with a Bachelors of Science degree, a Phi Beta Kappa key, and uh, that was nineteen forty nine. And that was pretty good for a girl to go to college, a girl. And uh, but my cousin came to me and he said he thought I really should go to graduate school and he connected me with Dr. Morton Klein who was here, who had just come from Penn. And, I remember coming up on the train from Wilmington and I was just terrified, just terrified in this man's world {LG}. And um, I was interviewed by, uh, Kenneth Goodner, who was the head of the department. And his first words to me were, "Why do you want to do this? Why don't you go get married?" And I said, "In due time." And uh, so I was -- it, this was the first year of a graduate program.

KD: Yes.

¹ Transcription rules are based on the University of Pennsylvania's February 2011 Transcription Guidelines: http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/L560/Transcription_guidelines_FAAV.pdf

SS: And I was then the first woman in it. And uh, it was, um, an interesting experience. Uh, some people were wonderful. Um, I must say, for the record, that Kenneth Goodner did his best to embarrass me, in classes with all of these, um, laughing medical students. And uh, {LG} I won't go into details, but I was very young then and I blushed very easily and I sat there with however many hundred students {BR}, cringing. And um, but I learned a lot and I loved the professors I had. I can't remember all their names now, but some of them were really wonderful. And uh, Dr. Klein left here to go to Temple Medical School and asked me to come up there with him, and we started the first, uh, virus diagnostic lab up there. And I worked there for two years, commuting from Wilmington.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: And had a wonderful time being an instructor. Uh, I was there at least, maybe sometimes five and a half days a week when we were doing labs and I commuted from Wilmington and my salary was twenty four hundred dollars a year. And I thought that was great. And after a while I thought, "Oh, I -- there is serendipity in life." When I was here at Jeff I was commuting and I was on the train with all my books and a man next to me asked what I was doing and I told him, and he was a uh, in the personnel department at DuPont. And he said, "If you ever want a job, let me know." And I was on my way to Temple, but after two years I thought "I'll give it a try." And he remembered, and again serendipity. Uh, the big Central Research Department at DuPont was starting its first microbiology, uh, project. And so to add to being the first woman to get a degree here I was the first woman and the second Jewish person hired by the big Central Research Department. And I was in charge of all of the microbiological and biolog- biological and biochemical, um, testing of all the new chemicals at Central Research. I -- they were marvelous to me, uh, although I have to say when I went there for an interview, being the first woman again, they were very nice. They didn't tell me why I ought to go out and get married, but the, um, head of the department said, "Now, we don't have anything against love Miss Schorr, but if we hire you we expect you to stay two years." Now my husband came a year later, a chemist. They never said that to him.

KD: Of course.

SS: And then they said to me, "The salary for a woman with your degrees and your experience is forty eight hundred dollars a year." Now that was double what I was making. And it didn't occur to me -- I mean if you knew me now {LG} you wouldn't believe it didn't occur to me to say, "What do you mean, for a woman, what do you mean?" But they were marvelous to me. They, the, the people in my group, all the chemists, all the management, they couldn't have been nicer. I had a lot of fun.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: Uh, Gil, my husband, came to, um, DuPont a year later. And then after, just after he got his PhD and he wasn't there long, and he got drafted. Um, when he came back, um, uh, we got married a few years later. Um, my six year old great-granddaughter says to my daughter-in-law, "Where did gigi Sonia meet with gigi Gil?" And my daughter-in-law said, "A Democratic meeting" and she went "Oh."

SS: {LG} So we didn't meet at DuPont. And I worked at DuPont for {BR} seven years, uh, 'til our older son, uh, was about to be born. Um, I wanted to stay home and raise my kids. Um, I always said if they turned out well, I'd like to say that I was there. And if something didn't go right I'd say, "Ooh." And, uh, twice, interestingly enough, the people at DuPont asked me if I would come back. [Sonia's husband Gilbert slides her a note] He's giving me a note. What are you saying? Ahaha, he's saying -- I'll tell you what he said -- we might do that {LG} [Sonia handed Kelsey the note]. I don't know, I'll -- you can turn it off and then you'll tell me whether you want it.

KD: {LG}

SS: Um, and twice they asked me to come back, because I had technicians working for me.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: And I said, twice, I would come back part-time. And uh, they did -- they were marvelous to me, but they didn't quite know how to deal with part-time.

KD: Sure.

SS: And so I said, "OK." And um, we have two wonderful sons. One fifty five, who's, um, a rheumatologist, who works for a pharmaceutical company and one who's a president of a, of a uh, Canadian-US recycling company, and all of these wonderful granddaughters and great-grandchildren. Um, I got very involved because I, I was a stay-at-home mom, but I got, given my family background, very involved in, um, in politics.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: Um, uh, lots of, lots of time spent on that and as a matter of fact still. Um, I, I ran the Eugene McCarthy campaign in Delaware in sixty-eight. And uh, my husband and I have been very close to the vice-president², uh, since nineteen seventy, and I've worked on every campaign. And um, as a matter of fact, I got the first money for him in nineteen seventy two to start his campaign, when campaigns cost maybe eighty five thousand.

KD: Sure.

SS: And, and uh, just another case of serendipity. Somebody in Washington called me, and and uh -- so he and I talk about how that led his campaign. All of twenty five thousand dollars.

KD: Yeah.

SS: Um, so uh, we're still involved. Um, I uh, was president of the Board of Planned Parenthood in Delaware from, uh, nineteen eighty to eighty four. And we built a new building, and I said, "When we build that building, we're going to put in abortion services." The thing I am most proud of. And, about a year ago they asked me to come back on the Board. And I said, "OK, but I'm

² Joe Biden

eighty-six and you will not get me to chair any committees.” And they said fine, and now I’m chairing all of the Development work.

KD: {LG} Of course.

SS: And spending a lot of time because it’s uh, the cause of reproductive choice and women’s rights, uh, {LG} go way back to my being the first woman here and the family that I came from.

KD: Yeah.

SS: So uh, um, it’s been a very happy life, and I have no regrets, and it’s -- it was fun to be a pioneer in some of those places. Um, and it’s very interesting to sit here. The first day I walked up those steps as a student in that all-male place and there was -- is the Dr. Gross Clinic still in there? Or did, was it moved to the Museum?

KD: No, it’s at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

SS: That’s what I thought.

KD: But they have a reproduction, which you can see.

SS: Oh, I’ll walk over there.

KD: If you look through that window when you leave the library.

SS: Yeah, yeah, but it was, uh -- I commuted the whole time, and uh, I had a wonderful time except for {LG} some uh, a few moments. Um, you can turn that off.

[Recording paused]

KD: OK.

SS: Um, back to, um, my remarks about when I was asked how everybody treated me. And I said that everybody was wonderful. I just had one professor, who was the head of the department, who um, wasn’t quite sure what to do with women or why I was there. And I uh mentioned before that there was one very embarrassing situation, but my husband’s encouraging me to be more specific! But I sat in microbiology class one day with all the medical students. I don’t know whether, couple hundred maybe in the class then, and all men obviously. And uh, uh, Goodner was giving his uh, stock lecture on antigens and antibodies and how their specificity and it’s like a lock and a key, and it just has to fit. Only he decided his analogy was going to be the male and female genitalia, which, uh, prompted loud guffaws while I blushed incredibly red, and I went back to the professor with whom I was working, and I was really distraught, and he said “You should go back and tell him locks and keys are specific, and this is not.” And I said, “Now you tell me.” So there’s your story, if you think you want to use it {LG}.

KD: Alright.

[Recording paused]

SS: Um, yeah, um, when I got involved with Planned Parenthood, uh, I was President of the Board, and we lost our Executive Director so I was President of the Board and for seven months I was the unpaid Executive Director and building a building.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: And when it was all over I was really weary. And somebody from the YWCA came to me and said, would I help, as a volunteer, with long-range planning? And I said "You know, I'm really. Well, but it's women. So I better go do it." And I worked on that planning committee for nine months, and when it was all over the decision was made they had to build a building and they had to have a development department. So, very late in life I went to work for the YWCA, in Wilmington, as their Development Director, and set up the whole department and ran a capital campaign and uh, I loved it. And I decided when I was sixty-five, uh, I was going to retire because he³ was, and you heard, he's still going up to Penn helping students. And um, so I decided I was going to retire, and then somebody came to me and said, "Would you run a capital campaign for us?" And so, until about two years ago, I had my own fundraising consulting business and raised, oh, probably over a hundred million dollars for various agencies. And um, got the award from the fundraising organization for the lifetime something achievement. And um, and I still have friends who come to me and I give them free advice. {LG} And that's what I spent the other day doing. And um, that's fun. Because it's, it's the not-for-profit world and it's -- they're all good causes. I was always in the fortunate position, because it wasn't my sole livelihood, uh, that I could turn down campaigns, uh, for organizations in which I didn't believe. And uh, one of the Foundation people said to me one time, "What -- how do you decide what to do?" And I said, "I don't want to do anything I don't have any passion for." And if, if there's anything that makes you effective in any job, not just that, um, it's showing that you really believe in, in what you're doing. And fundraising is, it's not so easy now because times are tougher and things are cutting back, but it's been very easy in Delaware because you get to know -- that's the joy of Delaware, you get to know all the politicians, you know the senators by their first names. You can call 'em up, especially if you've worked for them as we have. So that was the rest part of my life that um, I'd almost forgotten about. Busy looking at the building over there. So, it's been interesting careers, from a scientist to a mother to a, well you never stop being a mother, um, to a development position and totally away from science, but raising money for good causes.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: Things like the food bank, Center for Contemporary Arts, and the College of Art and Design, and the Girl Scouts, and it's, it's been fun.

[Recording paused]

KD: OK.

³ Her husband, Gilbert Sloan

SS: It's um, we have, as I said, five granddaughters, ranging from eleven to sixteen to thirty-two and thirty-four -- and thirty-six. I lose track. And it's uh, interesting when I tell them because they're in a world where women don't have many barriers.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: And it's, it's kind of awesome for them when I tell them, you know, you can just walk in and do what you want and there's not a lot of discrimination about salary. There still is, but nothing like it was then.

KD: Yeah.

SS: And uh, so, it's certainly been a satisfying life for me. Um, and it's um, satisfying for me, and us, both of us, to see our granddaughters. And when the little four and six year old great-granddaughters, um, it will be very, uh, rewarding, because they're in a different world and maybe, uh, hearing from me that you could uh -- it's alright to go poke your way into the man's world, and uh, they'll be far more welcoming today. But as I say, the professors here at Jeff, uh, were just wonderful. I can't remember their names, but they were marvelous. And um, I have uh a physician here at Jefferson. Dr. Yeo?

KD: Oh, yeah. Geoffrey Yeo?

SS: Yeah. Jo- uh, Charles Yeo.

KD: Oh, Charles Yeo, that's what it is. Yeah.

SS: Yeah, he did some very uh, very tricky surgery on me. And as a matter of fact, um, Gil and I are on the Board of, it's called the Fraunhofer, uh, Center for Bio-

GS: Molecular Bio

SS: Molecular Bio-, Bio-, Molecular?

GS: Biotechnology.

SS: Biotechnology. I always have to stumble over that. And we're on the Board, and um, we've made a -- I, I, I was so impressed with Dr. Yeo, and, and uh, the way he took care of me, and uh I got to know Lara Goldstein. Do you know Lara?

KD: I don't.

SS: She's the development person. Anyhow, I did get s- about thirty five thousand from some sources in Delaware for their research. And I've gotten to know Dr. Brody, who works with uh, Dr. Yeo, and uh, we're making some connections with this place in, in Delaware, so it's -- Jefferson still continues in my life.

KD: Mm hm, that's great.

SS: So, are there any things you want to ask me?

KD: Yeah, so, it sounds like your family was very supportive.

SS: Absolutely.

KD: Of your choice to continue on with your education, and, excuse me, and um you said the professors were largely supportive. How about the students? Did you notice any pushback from them?

SS: The professors, I would say, were all supportive except one who -- he couldn't understand why a woman was there. Um, I think in general, {LG} except for those embarrassing moments when they had a good, good laugh at my expense, {NS} I found them, you know, very nice, very pleasant.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: And I, I can't think of the biochemistry professor's name, Abraham, something⁴. He was just marvelous, and uh, we had some of our own seminars, 'cause there were other graduate students that came that first year.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: Uh, but they were not women. But we had a wonderful -- it was a wonderful group of graduate students and uh, it was a very happy experience, and it, uh -- I have to thank my cousin, who was really like my brother, for pushing me to do this. Because that wasn't -- not too many women in nineteen forty nine -- and uh, I didn't come from a family that had a great deal of money. Uh, we were just fine. Um, but I thought I got out of Syracuse, I oughtta go get a job. And so I thank my cousin for putting me on a path that uh, I would have never taken.

KD: Yeah. And you went straight from undergraduate to Jefferson?

SS: To Jefferson.

KD: OK.

SS: And I sent you all of the materials.

KD: Yes. I do remember that, very well.

SS: And it was, it was a big deal. At the Academy of Music and all of that, you know. And I was very -- and talk about -- one of the medical students I didn't even know very well, who was from Hawaii, the day I graduated sent me a lei of orchids, or something.

KD: Oh, that's lovely.

SS: So it was very sweet, it was very sweet. And um, uh, I, I just, I don't know where my life would have gone.

⁴ Abraham Cantarow

KD: Mm hm.

SS: If I hadn't, I would have probably gone and gotten a lab -- a job with a pharmaceutical company or something.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: And I, I-- the students here were wonderful and um, it was, it was a marvelous experience. And uh, not every single person in your life is going to be perfect. And I got -- {NS} it was a learning experience dealing with somebody who wasn't quite sure why I was there. I think it was, it was -- changed his world. And uh, but it changed my world too, so it's OK {LG}.

KD: Yeah, definitely.

SS: Yup. Is there anything else you want to ask me?

KD: Um, no more specific questions on my end, unless there's any other memories, recollections you'd like to bring up? Anything else you'd like to talk about?

SS: Well, it was, it was always, I would take the train up. I would take a local train. I lived north of the city and would get off at Suburban Station and walk down, and uh, it was uh, it was always a thrill and exciting and uh challenging. Um, and uh, it was, it was just, it started me on a whole new path in my life and uh, that took me to Temple, where I had a wonderful learning experience teaching on the other side, to students. And um, if I hadn't met that man on the train I wouldn't have gone to DuPont and uh, would have never known him⁵ when somebody brought him to a meeting. So it's um, it's a, it's a very happy life. It's fulfilling, uh, it's had its up and downs like everybody's, but I wouldn't change anything that I did for anything in the world. And uh, uh, and I'm still very active, as I told you.

KD: Yes.

SS: Planned Parenthood and on this, uh, biotechnology board, and I've been on some other boards. Um, I um, uh, had a wonderful time doing things in politics and uh, still do! And uh, so I have no regrets about not continuing working. By the time my boys, our boys, were old enough that I felt I didn't need to be around, the field had changed drastically. And it would have meant going back to school, and I was.

KD: OK.

SS: Not about to do that at that stage of my life. And um, so it's um, because I didn't go back to work I always had the wonderful opportunity, and I always felt bad that my husband couldn't go see our son play soccer who -- when he was an all-state soccer player. And, and those are things I would have missed, and I uh, I always felt guilty that he missed them. But it was uh, it's just been a great life. And I've had a lot of medical problems and I haven't paid any attention to 'em, and I've had some great care from Jefferson.

⁵ Her husband, Gilbert Sloan

KD: Mm hm.

SS: And I still keep my connections with Dr. Yeo and with uh, uh, Dr. Brody and Dr. Winter.

KD: OK.

SS: And uh, so I still have some connection here, which is nice.

KD: Yeah. Are, are you still in contact with anybody who you went to graduate school with?

SS: Um. No.

GS: They're all dead.

KD: I was going to say, it's been a long time.

SS: Yeah, yeah. I did the other day.

KD: OK.

SS: Thinking about here -- look up one man, um, but I can't, I couldn't quite track him down. And I tried to track down a couple of the med students I knew, but it's uh, you know, they're -- I don't know whether they're alive. They probably don't think I'm alive either {LG}! So it's, it's just been uh, and Jefferson was a big part of my life because it started me on a path that uh, brought me a lot of pleasure, a lot of rewards, and hoped that in all that time I did some interesting things.

KD: Mm hm.

SS: And um, it, it was, it was, it -- all of it was serendipity. That my cousin who's like my brother met Dr. Klein and, and from there to Temple and meeting the man on the train. So it's, it's been, it's fun. I'm uh -- I keep trying to write all these things down for my kids, but I'm not getting very far.

[End of recording]