

RECORDED INTERVIEW OF ROBIN BARKER

CONDUCTED BY KAREN BREWSTER

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KAREN BREWSTER: This is Karen Brewster and today is October 2nd, 2024. And I'm here with Robin Barker and accompanying also Jim Barker, her husband, at their lovely home here in Fairbanks, Alaska. And I'm going to talk to Robin about some of her time spent out in Bethel, Alaska and the work she did out there, and their lives out there. So thank you Robin for being willing to have me back.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, yeah, I'm glad to have you back.

[00:00:37]

KAREN BREWSTER: So why don't you tell us a little bit of background of your life before you came to Alaska.

[00:00:42]

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, okay. I grew up in Princeton, New Jersey, and my dad was associated with the university. And it was kind of a little island, a little academic island in the state. It was beautiful, it was a beautiful small town. You know, in many ways I had an ideal childhood. You know, we all have our issues. But I had an excellent, excellent education. I worked harder in high school than I did in college. That may be true for a lot of people. But I just thirsted for something different. And when I graduated from college -- I went to college at Tufts -- Well, I started out at Smith College and it wasn't my kind of place. So, after a time off I went to Tufts University and graduated from there. And part of the reason I went there was they had the Eliot-Pearson School of Child Development. And I was -- at that time I was very interested in child development, had always done lots with children. And then I moved to rural Vermont and did the hippie back to the land thing. And I taught kindergarten and then I taught in a free school. Back in the day, we called them free schools. And I taught four to eight year-olds in the lobby of the post office. It was wonderful.

But I had a friend who I had known when I was in college and he turned up in Bethel, Alaska. I heard from him. And it was a brief romance. But it was part of the reason why I came to Bethel. Also, significantly, they had just started the community college there. And they had a grant with Rural CAP (Rural Alaska Community Action Program) to teach child development to the Head Start teachers in the villages. And so I didn't have the job when I went up there, but I had a pretty good shot at it. So that's how I ended up in Bethel.

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KAREN BREWSTER: And what year did you graduate from college?

ROBIN BARKER: Seventy-three. So I went up there in seventy-five. I finished college in seventy-two. But I didn't graduate 'til -- I had one paper left. One of those things.

[00:03:57]

KAREN BREWSTER: So you ended up in Bethel in 1975?

ROBIN BARKER: Seventy-five, yeah. And I first went up for a visit in February. And I got met at the airport by this fellow. And he was a legal services attorney. So we went to a party at the office. And I walked in the door and there was Jim Barker. He has a photograph of me walking in the door. And we didn't get together. My romance fizzled out rapidly. And we didn't get together until the fall. But we were both sort of on the rebound. And we decided that we were not -- we were going to take it slow. We weren't going to instantly move in together, and this and that. Well, in early December of that year, when it was very cold, the power plant burned to the ground. And I actually was staying over at Jim's house at the time 'cause I had hurt my back and I needed taking care of. And I was getting better at that point. But anyway, a third of the community depended on electricity for heat. And so overnight, a certain percentage of people got on the plane and left. And the rest moved in with everybody else. And so my little one room apartment, the little shack that it was, got filled up with a family of ten from Hooper Bay. And they didn't leave until March. So that's the story of how Jim and I ended up living together.

[00:06:02]

KAREN BREWSTER: So you moved in with Jim?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, I just stayed. I was there.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, that's right. Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: And I just stayed. And that was the end of our vow that we were going to take it slow.

JIM BARKER: Well, part of the reason being is that the stove worked in the house and also the lights. So that we were -- everything was working.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, Jim's place was fine.

[00:06:26]

KAREN BREWSTER: So tell me about this first job.

ROBIN BARKER: Well --

KAREN BREWSTER: Was it with RurAL CAP? Or was it with the college?

ROBIN BARKER: No, it was with the college. They had a contract with RurAL CAP. And I only did that for two years. It was an immense amount of travel in the villages. And at that time, there was no community college in Nome or in Dillingham. So the villages that I went to were all the way from Savonga to Manokotak. And I was just frazzled after a couple of years. I loved it. I really enjoyed meeting all these wonderful people who were studying in the villages and teaching Head Start. And spending some time in the Head Start classrooms, which I just loved. It was interesting. A number of my students had finished maybe seventh grade and had not gone off to the boarding schools. And so their writing skills and so on were negligible. And over the summer, I had worked on writing some curriculum with a group of people. And I knew nothing. I just knew nothing. And one of the things about working in the Yup'ik villages is that people are really forgiving. And they're also reluctant to contradict or even suggest anything different from what you're doing to let you know that you're treading on things. So I kind of proceeded in abysmal ignorance for quite a while. And really, it just took me years and years to figure a lot of things out about children. But I had a wonderful time.

The other thing that I was up against was that the teachers that I had, their memory of school was 1950's or '40s maybe. I mean when they had gone to school, some of them were quite elderly, but none of them had good school experiences. And their idea was that they just superimpose what they knew about teaching into the Head Starts with the little kids. And it was a real challenge. I particularly remember this one man in Gambell who was -- His name was Jerry Tungiyen. He's long since passed away. He was a little older. And he was trying to do a little math experience in the Head Start. And he just really didn't understand what he was supposed to do. And it just flopped. You know, the kids just walked away. And he had prepared this thing for me. So then it was time for the kids to go outside. And when they went out, he opened the hood of his snowmachine and he started tinkering with the snowmachine. Well, the kids all were like little magnets, you know. And he went through all this stuff about the snowmachine and let them touch it and all that stuff. And at the end of the day, we sat down to talk about what he had done. And, you know, he just said, "That was terrible what I did." And I said, "Yeah, but I saw a really wonderful lesson outside with your snowmachine." I hope I got through a little bit. You know, who knows.

[00:11:21]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes, yes. So what are the principles of Head Start that you were trying -- You were trying to teach some of these basic principles of Head Start?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, we were working on trying to help people develop materials. And an environment that facilitated productive play. And, you know, that enriched the environment in such a way that kids would come up against concepts and formulate them for themselves. You know, we didn't want teacher-directed activities. With the exception of reading a story or some of those things.

KAREN BREWSTER: What age group?

ROBIN BARKER: Three to five. So that was a real challenge.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, but kids being able to sort of direct themselves, that's --

ROBIN BARKER: Make decisions for themselves.

KAREN BREWSTER: That is a traditional Alaska Native cultural way of raising children.

ROBIN BARKER: Absolutely. With very little adult intervention. And so -- but I was stupid enough. I mean, I knew that that was true, but putting it together didn't happen for a long time. You know, we are a product of our cultures.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

ROBIN BARKER: And yeah, I just -- I didn't put it together.

[00:12:56]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, 'cause it seems like -- Yeah, just on the surface it seems like, well, obviously that should work.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, yeah. So, but on the other hand, you know, I was fighting this idea of what school was supposed to be like. So, I actually think that we succeeded to a rather great degree in helping. I mean, I also think that they were doing these things for my class. And so they felt like they needed to be like a school teacher when I was there. And I suspect that there was a lot more free play when I wasn't there. So there was that.

KAREN BREWSTER: That's interesting.

ROBIN BARKER: And gosh, I really, I really appreciated them. They were -- You know, they were wonderful with parents as a rule. You know, getting parents involved. One of the big components of Head Start is that it's a family program. So, you know, they have a parent committee, the parents learn Robert's Rules of Order once again, which generally fell to the wayside. But also, they did learn those rules, which I think were very important at that time, you know, the land claims, whole land claims thing was happening and there were -- there was

hearing after hearing in the villages. And, you know, the whole point was to try to get parents, mothers in particular, to be comfortable to speak up in a meeting, and, you know, to practice the skills that they would need to participate in those very important meetings. So I was conscious of that. And, you know, and very encouraging of them to participate in those things.

But, and, you know, they had the traditional council, which was all men and the village council, which was at that time was all men. And I remember in Eek -- You know, money was coming, coming in. And at that time, the village had some money and they were talking about building a new city office or something like that in the council. And the women wanted a washeteria. They wanted someplace they could go and wash the clothes. And I remember encouraging them to, to go to the meeting and talk. You know, stand up for themselves. And I, you know, that was sort of not a whole lot of interest in going. And finally, one of the elder ladies said, "We have our ways." And they built a washeteria. So there was that. And we have our ways was something that I was trying desperately to learn. So -- So --

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KAREN BREWSTER: So, you said you think you succeeded with that program. In what way?

ROBIN BARKER: I think that for one thing we brought in a lot of wonderful materials. You know, lotto games and blocks and just lots and lots of materials. And, you know, the teachers couldn't help but be excited about -- about those things. A lot of them were not appropriate. And, you know, I -- and I immediately knew it. Like we had a play mat that the kids -- it was like a village or a town with a fire station and a police station and so on. And they moved their cars around on it. And, you know, I knew it wasn't appropriate.

The thing that I knew was least appropriate was in Head Start you're required to do some kind of developmental assessment at the beginning of the year and then one at the end of the year. And, you know, a lot of the items in that assessment were -- had to do with things the kids had no experience with. And I also knew that it wasn't really appropriate in the culture for you to demonstrate your prowess at anything. And so there was a reluctance to participate on the part of the kids. And maybe more importantly, a reluctance for the teachers who were supposed to administer these tests to demand that kind of behavior. So all in all, the testing was -- I thought it was just abysmal. We had to do it. And I kept trying different kits of tests to see what we could make work. To help parents celebrate the things that children learn to do. You know, I thought, well, there's nothing wrong with that, you know, for parents to see their kids grow. And it's fun when you kind of know that at 13 months a lot of children learn how to screech. I mean, I hear it in the grocery store sometimes, and I look around and that looked like a 13 month-old. But it's fun, you know, to go, "Oh, that's the thing that they talked about." So, you know, I felt pretty good about that part of it. And if there was a way I could do testing that kind of demonstrated some of that, I leaned towards those things. But it was hard.

And the kids did abysmally at the language questions, which, you know, we had the teachers conduct in Yup'ik because at that time the children were all Yup'ik speaking. And most of them

were not English speaking. And, of course, you know, that messes up the theory behind the test, but you have to do exactly the way the test is written. The standards are based on that. And so, of course, the standards were based on middle class children in the Lower 48, right?

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

[00:20:03]

ROBIN BARKER: Where language development is highly prized. You know, it's probably the major marker of development for middle class families. And it just wasn't in Yup'ik culture. What was really interesting was that the kids did really well on the motor areas.

KAREN BREWSTER: Like motor skills?

ROBIN BARKER: Motor skills. Yeah, they did really well. And I guess I'll get to that 'cause there's -- Later on I figured out a lot of reasons why that might be true. Where it looked to me as if they weren't getting what they needed to develop motor skills. But, you know, the kids -- Things have changed a lot with the children a lot since then. But the kids were really good listeners. They were really good listeners. Now do any of these tests really test listening?

KAREN BREWSTER: I don't know. They don't?

ROBIN BARKER: Not really. No. Not really. Some of them a little bit. But, you know, those little kids, those four-year-olds, they could recognize when a mail plane came in or a plane of any kind. Those small planes. They knew first of all what kind of plane it was. And secondly, they knew whose charter service, which plane it was, from inside the building. And the other thing was the little bit older kids, elementary school kids, particularly the boys, they could imitate every sound that a raven makes perfectly. Well, you don't do that unless you really listen. And, you know, that's a developing skill that was appropriate for later hunting and so on.

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KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and that makes me think about observational skills.

ROBIN BARKER: Yes, and observational skills. Which again, you know, it's not tested. You know, that visual spatial thing, which actually Judy Kleinfeld did a study, oh I think in the sixties, with Native and non-Native elementary school kids, I guess. And found that the Native kids were way ahead in visual spatial skills. So, you know, but I remember being in a -- later on when I was doing work with infants and babies, I was staying with a family in Scammon Bay. And there were three two-year-olds there. It was fun. And I remember there were birds in the chimney that were making noise. And, you know, the grandmother was pointing out, you know, "Do you hear the birds? Do you hear the birds?" And noises that were outside, she drew their attention to. So, you know, it was part of the learning process, you know. Unconscious, of course, but just built in the way our emphasis on language is.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right, well and their traditional hunting lifestyle, you had to be able to hear really well and see very well and observe what your environment and what's going on.

ROBIN BARKER: Right, right, yeah. I mean, I have lots of examples of adults. One time I was standing at the airstrip in Scammon Bay and this gentleman who was one of the husbands of the teachers, really nice guy. And it was, you know, snow on the ground and he pointed and he said, "Do you see the ptarmigan?" And I said, "No, I don't see any ptarmigan." He said, "Yeah, it's right there." "No, I don't see the ptarmigan." And so he says, "Well, you have to look for the red spot that's, you know, over their eye. Can you see that?" "No, I cannot see that. I never could see it." Well, there are two possibilities. One of which is, you know, he could see that red spot and I couldn't. The other possibility was that he was pulling my leg. And that's another essential part of Yup'ik culture is teasing. Teasing is big. And I like to tease, I like to be teased. And so, you know, I fit right in. But I still laugh, 'cause I have no idea which it was. And either one was believable. I have a great teasing story where I won.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, okay.

[00:25:44]

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. And that is that, you know, if you've been around in the villages enough and you've made enough friends and your people realize that you're okay to be teased, etc., one of the rights of passage is that you're asked to eat stink heads. And stink heads, you know, they are basically salmon heads that are buried in the ground for quite a long time and they sort of rot, and then they dig them up and eat them. And they're called stink heads for a reason. You may be familiar with them. And so one day I was hanging out. I was at fish camp and I was hanging out with a bunch of my girlfriends in the tent. And a child came to the tent and said, "Elders want Robin." I thought, "Oh boy, I bet I know what this is about." So I went over to where all the Elders were and they were lined up on both sides of the tent with a chair in front with a bucket next to it. And so I said, "Well, okay, I guess I'm the entertainment for the evening." And so, you know, this guy carefully fixed me a little piece and I popped it in my mouth and I chewed and I chewed and I chewed and I chewed. And finally I swallowed, and then I just sat there. And finally one of the Elders said, "How does it taste?" And I said, "You don't know?" And I really busted them up. Yeah, that was getting back for a good deal of teasing that I had received from all of them.

KAREN BREWSTER: That sounds perfect. That you could think that quickly. That's awesome.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, yeah. But anyway, I don't know where I was going with that.

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KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I'll bring us back to working in the schools and with the children. Eventually, it sounds like you did figure out some of these things.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: How did you do that?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, so after I was teaching for the college -- RurAL CAP developed nationwide (I think she means Head Start developed nationwide). They decided to go with a birth to three (years-old) home visiting program. And they set up thirty-six pilot programs and one of them was in Bethel. And so I joined the group. And I was really excited about working with really little ones. And we had this curriculum where we would bring in books and toys, educational -- I'm air quoting. Educational toys and books, children's books. So I was pretty excited about bringing the things in. And the home visitors were -- You know, we'd have these workshops and we talked about what children learned when they -- and we talked about reading and language development. And we were supposed to follow this curriculum that had been developed at that time. They called them culturally deprived children in New York City. And I did know that was a red flag. New York City was a red flag. It's like, well, you know, we'll do it our way. But we -- you know, we did the thing with the books and toys. And, of course, everybody loved it. They loved getting all these wonderful toys and stuff. But looking back on it, there were things we did that were inappropriate that I totally had no idea.

And I don't know how to get there, but to back up. Hm, you know, there's -- Well, let me just back up quite a ways. I think probably everybody hears about the tradition that you -- when a child is born, they're named after usually an Elder who's passed away or someone who has passed away. And their -- that Elder's spirit or whatever you want to call it enters the child. And so that child has sort of a dual identity. And that child is understood to be kind of close to the spirit world. And there's a lot of protection -- a lot of protective stuff that goes on to keep the child in this world. And one of those -- well, there's a whole bunch about gender and this and that. But one of the things that they don't do is they don't hold a child up to a mirror. They don't hold a child up to a window at night where they can see their reflection. Because, you know, there may be somebody looking back from the other world to that child who may actually decide to take the child, which means the child dies. And so that's a very dangerous thing.

And in fact, with infants -- and this is a whole other thing, but with infants, you don't hold a baby up to look out the window. They are understood to stay in the house. This goes all over the place. But the house is understood to be analogous to the womb. And for instance, when you're pregnant, you do not linger in a doorway or you're going to have a difficult delivery 'cause that doorway represents birth. And I got in trouble for that a couple of times. But --

So anyway, the baby is protected and is only allowed to go outside later, and then should not be taken around visiting. Should not be put on the ground. You know, when there was a potlatch and they invited the deceased, pounding your feet on the floor to wake them up and bring them in was, you know, long ago was a tradition. And so, you know, the underworld was a thing. But also just moving out into the tundra, you know, older kids were not supposed to go very far from the village unless they were accompanied. So you kind of gradually were able to move out.

So anyway, that explains why it was really stupid to bring busy boxes to babies, because a busy box has a mirror in it.

[00:34:34]

KAREN BREWSTER: And what is a busy box?

ROBIN BARKER: A busy box is a frame that's, you know, maybe two feet by a foot and a half. And it has little manipulative things on it. You know, a bell that you ring and, you know, all of that stuff. And it has a mirror on it. And, you know, the busy boxes kind of disappeared when we brought them in. They just kind of disappeared. And, you know, that was a puzzlement at the time. You know, I didn't figure it out until much later. So --

KAREN BREWSTER: And nobody would explain it to you?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, no.

KAREN BREWSTER: So how did you figure it out?

ROBIN BARKER: No, 'cause it would be an affront to say we don't want this.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: You know, everything's very implicit. Now somebody might have said something to me that they understood to be a hint, but it was probably very implicit if it happened at all. So -- I mean, a friend of ours was in Goodnews Bay and he was fishing with nets. And he went out and everybody was fishing in a particular part of this bay. And he looked at the currents and this and that, and he thought, "You know, I know a better place to fish." And he -- this was a teacher. And so he went over to this other place. He was there all by himself with his net in the water. And somebody came up with their boat and said, "Why don't you come and fish with us?" He said, "Well, you know, I think this might be a good way to catch fish." And he said, "You might catch a fish." And he's like, "What is he trying to mean?" And finally the guy said, "You might catch a whale." But it took quite a bit of prodding to get him to say that. And then it's might. "You might," because we don't predict. That's not -- that's hubris.

So anyway, gosh, somehow we got to mirrors.

[00:37:10]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, that was an example of learning something that wasn't appropriate, that you didn't know when those items were brought in. And then how you eventually figured out.

ROBIN BARKER: Right. And that was the program where I started to wake up a little bit. There's a Native woman in town who's just brilliant. She's written, I think it was a novel in

Yup'ik. I mean, when it was barely a new orthography. And she's done a lot of consulting with anthropology and so on. And I thought, you know, we're just not doing things right. This is not culturally appropriate in what we're doing. And so I thought, you know, I should go talk with Elsie Mather. And so I made an appointment with Elsie and I went over and I told her about our program. And she said -- I'll never forget it. She said, "So you don't think we know how to raise our babies?" Ouch. Ouch. And I'm not sure I could even answer. I don't remember the rest of the conversation, because it just threw me. And at the same time, you know, I was sort of there because I thought we weren't doing the right thing.

And so a couple of times a year we would bring all the home visitors in for a workshop, about nutrition and that kind of thing, and about development. And sort of in the middle of the workshop, I brought up -- it was maybe the thing -- No, it wasn't about the mirrors because that was much later. I brought up something that somebody had told me. Oh, maybe it was about not hanging around in the doorway when you're pregnant. And they said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, but I sometimes if I --" Oh, the other thing was as soon as you wake up when you're pregnant, you're supposed to go out the door. Get up out of bed, and you walk out the door. And, you know, it was sort of a practice run. But one of them said, "Well yeah, but when I didn't want to do that, I could turn my pillow over." And it would negate -- you know, it was like okay. And I have to admit when I was pregnant there were times when I turned my pillow over because -- probably most mornings because I just felt --

That was the other thing is there's this whole underlying thing about quote, superstition. And, you know, our culture is just rife with superstition. I mean, we don't hunt swans. And the reason we don't hunt swans is because European fairy tales are full of swans. Swans are these special creatures. There's really no reason. And I have to say swans taste pretty good.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and I've also heard that you don't hunt the -- In Iñupiaq culture, you don't hunt swans because they mate for life. And then you leave the partner alone forever. So --

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, that could be it, too. So maybe on both sides? But, you know, these rules were made by white men. And, you know, I think there would have been an outcry if we'd been hunting swans. So anyway. And there, I mean, why the heck do we hang dried up corn on a door at -- at --

KAREN BREWSTER: Harvest time?

ROBIN BARKER: A friend of mine, a good friend of -- a Yup'ik friend of mine was talking about things that he learned in school or that happened in school. And he said, "Why did the teacher --" He's talking like he was in the second grade or something. He said, "Why does the teacher hang that corn on the door? That's wasting food." And then later it's like, "I don't get Valentine's Day. There's this baby that runs around and shoots people." So, you know, why do we do what we do? We don't know. And we don't think about it. We're not aware of it.

[00:42:16]

KAREN BREWSTER: And why do we want to teach another culture our ways instead of using their own ways?

ROBIN BARKER: Right. And yeah. And, you know, a lot of -- many -- most probably of these things that I'm talking about for Iñupiaq (I think she meant to say Yup'ik), they weren't aware of why they do them. You know, this is what we do. So humans, you know. And being human, I couldn't help but sort of take on some of these reservations about doing certain things.

One time -- I'm going all over the place, but one time I was -- and this was a whole other thing, but I was involved in starting the domestic violence program. And so Emmonak -- In Emmonak, a few of the women there had decided that they were going to set up safe homes. And they asked me to come out and just talk with them about what they were doing and share what we were doing in Bethel and so on. 'Cause we had a little shelter, but we also had safe homes. And I couldn't go at first because I was pregnant and they had an outbreak of salmonella. And the doctor said I couldn't go. But, eventually, that was taken care of. And I went out there. So I was just showing, you know. It was obvious I was pregnant with my coat off, but not with my coat on. And so the plan was for me to go to Emmonak and do that. And then I was to go to Alakanuk and talk with the traditional council, because the health aide thought maybe they should do something. And so the idea was that I was going to find somebody who would take me by snowmachine from Emmonak to Alakanuk, 'cause it wasn't horribly far. But the lady said to me, "You can't go on the river when you're pregnant, because you might scare the fish." And I went, "Oh, now I'm in trouble. What am I going to do?" And then they said, "Yeah, you know, but just keep your coat on." And I thought -- I said, "You guys -- " Oh, when you have your period you can't go on the river. And so I said, "You guys, when you do home visits you walk across the river?" They said, "Yeah."

But so anyway, this Elder came and he picked me up and I got on the snowmachine behind him and I kind of sat back and we went almost all the way to Alakanuk and we saw -- we started seeing pieces of a snowmachine on the trail and the tracks went off the trail. We followed the tracks and there was a young boy, maybe eighteen, unconscious on the snow. And he had hit a tree or something. And so we rallied him and we got him into Alakanuk to the health aide. And this was kind of a disaster and I thought, "Maybe I shouldn't have been on the river pregnant." I mean, I had that feeling. So yeah, when you're just surrounded with all of these beliefs, it's sort of hard. Being a superstitious person from my own culture, knock on wood, right? You sort of absorb.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, it's hard not to when you're surrounded by it. I was thinking the opposite, well it's a good thing you were on the river and you guys found that young man.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, it is a good thing.

KAREN BREWSTER: You could take it the other way, too.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, he could have frozen. Yeah, it was cold. So yeah.

[00:46:30]

KAREN BREWSTER: But yes, so I'm going to take us into the domestic violence program.

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, okay, I'm not way done with the kids.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay, well let's go back to the --

ROBIN BARKER: I was going to talk about gender.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Because -- And naming. Because the naming thing is really important. So I guess I alluded to it earlier where somebody's passed away and the next baby that's born. So we had these really good friends, Maggie and Adolf. And Maggie was a famous storyteller. She died first. And then when Adolf died -- We used to go and visit them and drink coffee and talk with an Elder couple. When Adolf died, I was seven and a half months pregnant. So we went to the funeral and as we were going out, a bunch of the ladies from the family kind of surrounded me and they said, "You'll name him Adolf." I thought, "I can't." My dad fought in World War II. I just cannot name this baby Adolf. And I sort of objected or something. And they just called him "Grandpa," 'cause he was their grandpa. Our closest friend in the next two generations down called him "Grandpa."

[00:48:17]

KAREN BREWSTER: Even though you didn't name your son Adolf?

ROBIN BARKER: We didn't name him Adolf, no. His name is Eric.

KAREN BREWSTER: But they still called --?

ROBIN BARKER: They called him "Grandpa." And it was very obvious that he was Grandpa, to some extent. Later, when he was about four -- three or four, there was a knock on the door and our friend John, the grandson, said, "Grandpa's wife is having a birthday." I went, "His wife?" So there was a little girl that had been named after Maggie.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh!

ROBIN BARKER: And so she was having a birthday. So we went across the river to a fish camp. We got a present and brought it over. And, you know, it was funny. Again, things are strange. Eric was -- he had a really difficult time making friends with other children. He was

pretty isolated and almost adverse. And he has millions of friends now. But, he -- You know, we explained to him that she was in a way his wife, which he thought was very intriguing. And gave her her gift. And there were lots of kids that age. And at one point, we looked around and said, "Where's Eric and Crystal?" And we looked around, and they had climbed into one of the boats. And it was kind of out, you know, on the river.

KAREN BREWSTER: Ready to be launched?

ROBIN BARKER: Ready to be launched. And they were sitting in the back of the boat facing the river holding hands.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh. Oh, that's so sweet.

ROBIN BARKER: I know. And I was shocked. It was so unlike him. And again, you go, "What the hell is going on here?"

KAREN BREWSTER: It was grandma and grandpa.

[00:50:33]

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Yeah. So anyway. So -- and so also, you know, kids -- there's no reluctance about naming the child after the opposite gender. And I remember seeing a child with elderly grandparents walking down the hall in the hospital. And the child was totally decked in girls' clothes. Just everything. The earrings, you know, everything. And I just assumed it was a little girl. And the doctor came out of one of the rooms and he said to me, "That is a little boy." He had just examined him. He was a new doctor in town. And he was in a state of shock. But I knew -- At that point, I knew what was going on. But I don't -- you know, I don't know that I stopped and explained it to him. I probably should have. But anyway, so --

KAREN BREWSTER: So, in that example, that child's name had been from a woman?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so then the identity was female?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Yeah. So the idea is that you raise that child as the opposite gender. I should have said that. And gradually, as the child gets older, it kind of switches. And, you know, I kept thinking at the time, "This is a great gender study." But we were far, far from research centers.

So, you know, I mean I have one friend who -- a younger friend who was in Head Start when I first started going there. And she was raised as a boy. And, you know, she could pull nets and, you know, do all that stuff. And she's now, you know, married with a bunch of kids. She still wears her hair short, I think. No, no, she's grown her hair out. Anyway.

KAREN BREWSTER: And was that because her name was -- had come from a man before?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Or was it because she was the oldest and the family needed fishermen and hunter?

ROBIN BARKER: No, she'd been named after a man. So -- And they named her Samantha and called her Sam. But that whole progression from, you know, being very much that elder person to being maybe not so much that elder person and switching genders, I sort of suspect that it has to do with the fact that babies are understood to be close to the other world. You know, the mirror thing. And so, you don't put them on the floor.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

[00:53:57]

ROBIN BARKER: Well, of course, you know, motor development, we need to have kids crawling, right, before they can walk. And yet -- And yet, these kids surpass white middle class kids once they are up and walking. Well, you know, I started thinking about that. I'm thinking, "Okay, these babies --" Well, and first of all, we'd say, you know, it's crawling time, floor time, you know, blah, blah, blah. And we'd get endless excuses. The floor is cold, the floor is dirty. You know, somebody might step on the baby, you know. And -- and I realized there was something going on. But where I saw the kids was walking on beds and couches. Well, that's challenging.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: That's challenging. And so, you know, babies were just in laps and on the couch and on beds, and just not deliberately put on the floor. When they could really walk, then they could walk around on the floor.

KAREN BREWSTER: So they just skipped the crawling stage?

ROBIN BARKER: Well, they could crawl on a bed. Yeah. And maybe they learned later, but they learned better. You know?

[00:55:13]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I was wondering if there's a certain age that it was then okay to be on the floor?

ROBIN BARKER: Yes. Yes. I couldn't tell you what that age is, but I would say that once they're walking, that it -- it was okay, 'cause they could stand up and be -- not be flat down on the floor. Although, if they were walking and they got down and crawled, it was okay.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. I was going to say, but then you still sort of skipped the crawling on the floor stage?

ROBIN BARKER: Absolutely. Absolutely. And then, until they're quite a bit older, when you're outside, you don't put them on the ground. 'Cause the ground is that much closer to the underworld. You know? And -- and that's my theory.

KAREN BREWSTER: So if you're out at fish camp, you have the baby on your back?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. On your hip.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

ROBIN BARKER: In the tent.

KAREN BREWSTER: If you're -- Yeah, so if you're cutting fish, you don't just put the baby down? You --

ROBIN BARKER: No.

KAREN BREWSTER: -- hold it?

ROBIN BARKER: No, you hand it to a twelve-year-old.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

[00:56:13]

ROBIN BARKER: You know? I mean, those kids, at a very young age, they're taking care of babies.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Well, you said you put them in the tent, but the tent is on the ground. That was okay?

ROBIN BARKER: Actually, a lot of them are kind of raised.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. With a floor.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, okay. So that was okay?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, they were big white wall tents.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: With floors and stuff. So, you know, again, it's that thing of gradually getting -- being able to go -- to be safe.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

ROBIN BARKER: As you get further away from the house and as you get -- you get closer to the ground. And --

[00:56:54]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and these teachers who you were working with, the Head Start ones, it sounds like most of them, if not all, were Yup'ik or were they --?

ROBIN BARKER: They were all Yup'ik. Yeah. Yeah, they were all Yup'ik.

KAREN BREWSTER: Because that's the other challenge with educators in rural Alaska, is they're not necessarily from there.

ROBIN BARKER: Not -- no. And back then, there was one certified Yup'ik teacher and she wasn't teaching. She had some health problems. But now, you know, the little girls in that family that Sam was in, I think there's more than one of them teaching. But like in Chevak, I don't know that -- I think they're mostly all Yup'ik teachers.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. Well, and then I was gonna say, when you were starting this in the '70s, the classroom instruction was in Yup'ik because the teachers were Yup'ik speaking, the kids were Yup'ik speaking. Well, now the classroom instruction is in English and then they get the Yup'ik on the side.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, but there actually are more and more -- There's some immersion programs in Bethel. And some of my non-Native friends have put their kids in the Yup'ik immersion programs. And they're needed with the Native kids. You know, I think particularly with TV, kids really switched over to English.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Well, that's what I was thinking. And with --

[00:58:32]

ROBIN BARKER: And we talked -- you know, we talked with parents about, you know, the advantages of bilingualism and, you know, encouraging them to speak Yup'ik with their kids.

And they were reluc -- they were cagey about it, because they wanted their kids to succeed in school. So, there was that.

Yeah, anyway, there were various different attempts, you know, to develop -- Well, the orthography was being finished in '75. And my friends, Phyllis Morrow and Chase Hensel, were very much involved in developing curriculum materials and that kind of thing for the Yup'ik Language Center at the college. They were very close friends. And they're anthropologists. And so I learned a lot from them over the years. I learned a lot from them. So --

[00:59:45]

KAREN BREWSTER: I was going to ask you about -- So, we did the Head Start and then you did that birth to three home visits. And then what came next?

ROBIN BARKER: Well, for a year.

KAREN BREWSTER: Or how did that birth to three --?

ROBIN BARKER: Actually, between those two things, I took a year and I ran the child care center there for a year.

KAREN BREWSTER: In Bethel.

ROBIN BARKER: And, you know, by that time I had learned just a little bit of Yup'ik. You know, enough to play with kids on the floor. To play blocks and puppies and things. And, you know, some basic directions and things. And so, I did use those words when I was the director at the child care center. And there was one little girl who went home and said something about her Yup'ik teacher, Robin. And her mom said, "No, she's not Yup'ik. She's gussak." (white person) And, "No, no, no, she's Yup'ik." I took it as a big compliment. From a four year-old. But anyway --

[01:01:07]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes. So with that birth to three program, do you feel like there were some successes with that?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, well I started to say, ages ago, that after I talked with Elsie Mather, we had a workshop. And in the middle of the workshop, I said something about one of these traditional things. And then they added the, "Well, I turn my pillow" kind of thing. I thought, "Well, there's more." I knew there was more. And I said, "Well, you know, talk to me about some of these Yup'ik things that you really need to pay attention to with babies." And we just spent the rest of the day, and they came up with all these different things. You know, not to put the baby on the floor. And one of my favorites was, if you had babies' clothes out on the clothes line, you got to get 'em in before it gets dark. Because it's not safe. It's not safe for the baby to have their representative out there. But anyway, there were lots of things.

And so, you know, we continued with the books and toys for a while. But we added mostly to the prenatal curriculum, but also older kids. We added, you know, on each visit, one of these beliefs. And we tried to sort of connect them with the ages of the child that they were visiting. And we presented them as ways to show how much Yup'ik parents take care of their babies. And then we talked about them. And, you know, some of them were unfamiliar to some of these young parents. But my feeling was, well, first of all, you know, there's cultural preservation, revitalization, which I knew at the time was really important. And secondly, I just thought it was important for parents to think about. First of all, to legitimize things that they were doing and to, you know, help them develop an appreciation for things that their parents and grandparents were doing. And not just think of them -- You know, some of them were young enough and acculturated enough that they might think, "Oh, this is just superstition." And so, you know, those were kind of the two main aims of doing that.

[01:04:14]

KAREN BREWSTER: So who were doing the home visits? Was it you or --?

ROBIN BARKER: The Yup'ik home visitors. But when I went out there -- I'd go out there for three days or something, and I would go on home visits with the home visitor.

KAREN BREWSTER: So the home visitor was from that village?

ROBIN BARKER: From the village, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. And they got training?

ROBIN BARKER: They got training.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

[01:04:35]

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. And I think that people were pretty excited about that part of it. And the director -- I don't know what last name she goes by now, but she was Sharon Hodgins at the time. She was a pretty skookum person, too. I suspect that she was going through some of these questions herself. But I was kind of ahead of her. And I think when we had that workshop and we developed that curriculum, the light bulb went on over her head and she started thinking about the books and toys thing. And so more and more, they found out about homemade toys that parents could make. And particularly anything that was traditional. And, you know, little babies traditionally didn't really have toys, but they probably played with pots and pans or whatever was around. And so we tried to sort of -- And, of course, that's good practice anyway to help people appreciate how their baby learns from just their environment. And so, after I left the program, they did more and more of this and they dropped the books and toys.

And the other thing that she did was she really, really -- she brought some of the home visitors into Bethel to take positions at the next level up. And really trained them so that when she left, one of them took over. And then she switched the program from RurAL CAP to the -- was it FNA? No, FNA is Fairbanks. To the Native Corporation, the Health Corporation.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation? YKHC?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. And they actually developed a Head Start classroom in Bethel, too. And that was run by a Yup'ik woman.

[01:07:26]

KAREN BREWSTER: And so how were those home visitors selected? They were paid for this job?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And they applied or --?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, they applied. And in Head Start, the parents do the hiring.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh?

ROBIN BARKER: Which --

KAREN BREWSTER: I thought that in Head Start it was already people who were teachers. No?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, no, no, no, no. No, that wouldn't have worked.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: That wouldn't have worked at all. You take an elementary school teacher and you put them in a Head Start program, it's often a disaster.

[01:08:00]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, what you were saying before about that Head Start program and working with the teachers, I thought they were classroom teachers.

ROBIN BARKER: No, when I talk about teachers, I'm talking about Head Start teachers.

KAREN BREWSTER: Who were different than classroom teachers?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, yeah, they refer to themselves as teachers.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: They were.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. That's my misunderstanding.

ROBIN BARKER: In the way that a child care program or a preschool program has a teacher.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. No -- Now, I -- That was my mistake.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Not knowing enough about Head Start.

ROBIN BARKER: No, I should've been more clear.

[01:08:30]

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. But, so, the home --

ROBIN BARKER: I wasn't working with non-Native teachers really ever.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Once in a while when I was at -- I did have a couple of teachers in Bethel when I was at the college who wanted one credit to get their pay raise or whatever. And I just really had a hard time. They -- just both of them. They just were so teacher directed.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: You know, "I'll make a bullet board. Forget about putting the kids' pictures up."

KAREN BREWSTER: And so the Head Start teachers, they were Yup'ik, but at the time the regular classroom teachers were --?

ROBIN BARKER: In the elementary school.

KAREN BREWSTER: Were mostly --?

ROBIN BARKER: I mean, when I started, they were BIA schools.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. But those were non-Native teachers still?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, they were non-Native teachers.

KAREN BREWSTER: So that was the same? Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. And I didn't get to know them really because I stayed with families. Thank God.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: There were two sets of teachers that I did get to know who were -- their kids spoke Yup'ik, you know.

[01:09:46]

KAREN BREWSTER: But so for the home visitors program, how did those people -- I mean -- Somebody in the village said, "Oh, that sounds interesting. I want to do that."?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. They filled out an application form, which was a good thing for them to learn. And then there was the parent committee. There's a parent committee made up of all the parents. And then they would choose a hiring committee of maybe four people. And they do interviews, and we helped them figure out what questions they wanted to ask. And they conducted the interviews.

KAREN BREWSTER: This was for Head Start or for the home visitors? Or both?

ROBIN BARKER: Both.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: They were both Head Start programs. And that's by law the way Head Start works, everywhere. But, in particular, where we were, where there was such a big cultural difference, and village -- experience of village life, they knew who was who in the village. They did a much better job hiring than we would have. It was really obvious afterwards I'd get to know all the applicants, and there's hands down they would make the right decision. There was occasional nepotism, but there was more of it in Athabaskan country when I worked there.

[01:11:19]

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. So, that home visitor program, you feel like that was successful?

ROBIN BARKER: It got better and better. And actually, it really sort of got to be full-blown Yup'ik-centered after I left. By the time I moved to Fairbanks. And I had -- when I had Eric, let's see, I took a year off. Well, and then I went back. I actually worked for them twice. It was a fabulous experience, just a fabulous thought-provoking experience.

But to back up, after I taught at the college, well, the first workshop that I held, I didn't know what I was doing for the three to five-year-old Head Start teachers that I -- You know, it was like the first year that I was there, two things happened. One of my teachers, an elderly man, got hit by a car and he was unconscious by the side of the road.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, no.

ROBIN BARKER: And somebody called the paddy wagon because he was supposedly drunk, right? And the assumption was he was drunk. And they threw him in the paddy wagon. He had a broken back.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, my goodness.

[01:13:05]

ROBIN BARKER: And that paddy wagon -- You know, there were potholes. It was a steel box in the back with nothing to hold onto. I rode in that paddy wagon once, but that's another story. And I just got thrown all over the place. Anyway, I was furious. I was furious. You know, and it was just such a racist thing.

And then the other thing that happened was one of the women was raped. And again, you know, I was just horrified. And I started asking around, and it turned out that a lot of women were being raped. And there had been -- While I was there, there was a trial, a rape trial. The guy was acquitted. It was the first rape trial in nine years. And I just had to do something. And so I had two friends, and we just started having coffee at my house, and saying, "You know, we've got to do something. We need a program to help these women." And it was pretty clear to me that it was happening often. And I had no idea how often. But, fortunately, one of the women was the wife of the district attorney. And so we got him on board. And he said, "Yeah, you know, you find these women and I'll prosecute."

And so we started out by having an answering machine. We recruited a bunch of volunteers who were willing to go out. And I did a little training with them, which -- Oh, I guess one of the women was a social worker. She did some training. I didn't know anything. But we did a bunch of things. We started this -- We had this answering machine in our house. And if somebody wanted to yell help, they would call the answering machine. If I wasn't home -- I was traveling in the villages. If I wasn't home, it would say, "The volunteer is so-and-so at such-and-such a number, you know, on Monday through Wednesday. Thursday and Friday, the volunteer is --" I mean, they had to listen to this whole thing and take down the numbers and make the calls. And

we got, like -- at that point, we got like three calls a week. And, you know, there were times when I had two calls in a night.

And we went up and met with the doctors at the hospital. They were not collecting evidence. We should have taken the DA with us. But anyway. And they just sat there and they said, "Well, who are you? And do you have stationery?" And we said, "We can do stationery."

KAREN BREWSTER: Why would you need stationery?

[01:16:35]ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Yeah. Do you have a logo? And so, you know, we incorporated. And we got the doctors on board. But it took a little.

And the troopers. Oh, my God, the troopers. We had a community meeting, and the idea was just to let people know what we were doing and see if we could recruit more volunteers. We needed volunteers. So we only had, like, twelve to fifteen. And so, we had all these women at this meeting in the library. And we had somebody from -- no, not legal services. We had the DA. We had several different people. One of them was a state trooper. And he got up and he said, "Well, actually, there is no such thing as rape for Yup'ik women." He said, "Because it has to be against your will. And Yup'ik women want to have sex all the time." He said that!

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, my God!

ROBIN BARKER: And I just sat there and I thought, "Hooray, if anybody's going to get recruits --" The Yup'ik woman next to me said, "Sign me up." You know? Yeah, I just could not believe my ears. And I should have known. There weren't any trials. And so, you know, we carried on.

And before too long, maybe after about a year, well, there was the first women's conference in Anchorage. And the focus of it really was rape and domestic violence. Oh, there were other things, 'cause I did a thing with a lawyer. But anyway, so I presented our workshop. And I was shocked to discover that Anchorage and Juneau and Fairbanks were not collecting data. And I said, "Here's our data. And you need to start collecting data if we're going to go to the legislature and get some of these things changed." And anyway, so these entities were all sort of being formed at the same time. We were a little after the fact than in the larger places, but we were right in there.

[01:19:42]

KAREN BREWSTER: And you said you incorporated, so did you have a name for your organization?

ROBIN BARKER: Tundra Women's Coalition. Which I was the one who suggested the word "coalition." And I really regretted it later, because when they made announcements on the radio, it was always "Tundra Women's Collision." That was not a good choice. But anyway.

[01:20:11]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, you said you recruited volunteers. And they go out into the community? And how did they find people to let them know about this?

ROBIN BARKER: No, when somebody was raped, they would call. And they would call this person, and they would show up immediately to wherever that woman was. To the hospital, to the police station, to the person's home, and just walk through the whole process with them. And it kept the police on their toes. They sort of had to take it seriously. They hadn't been collecting people's clothes. We brought a black bag with a change of clothes in it. So there was just no evidence being collected.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. And so those volunteers agreed to be on call to go help as needed?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Yeah, in the middle of the night often. More often than in the middle of the night.

[01:21:19]

KAREN BREWSTER: How did you get the women in the community to know this service was available?

ROBIN BARKER: We just advertised. I mean, it was a small community. We had little interviews on the radio. The "Tundra Drums" was the paper. We had little articles on -- The woman who ran the "Tundra Drums" was very sympathetic. And yeah, we just sort of got the word out. And it went out quickly. I think word of mouth.

And so then after a while, we decided that we should also include domestic violence, which was at an even greater rate. And I had real trepidations about it. I thought, "We could barely handle what we're doing." But we went ahead.

And, at the same time, we knew that we had to have a center where people could sleep. So, we set our sights on this old Quonset building. And it was half sunk into the tundra. And we thought, well, we'll raise it up. And we got some small grants. So we went to the city council. It belonged to the city. Went to the city council, and we asked if we could pay \$50 a month and rent this place. And there was a lot of hems and haws. They weren't -- they wanted to use it as a fire practice or something. And people were kind of reluctant. But there was Eddie Hoffman. And Eddie Hoffman was kind of a gruff -- famous for being kind of gruff and somewhat naive in some ways. But he thought we should do it. And later I found out that he actually was putting people up who were being beaten up at home and stuff. And so he said, "I think we should rent it to them for \$50." And there was more negative discussion. And then he said, "Yeah, I think for \$30 we should rent it to them." And then later it was, "Well, for \$25, you know." Blah, blah, blah. And finally, he just persisted. And we got it for \$25.

KAREN BREWSTER: Wow.

ROBIN BARKER: And he said -- When it passed, he said, "And I really like lemon meringue pie." And so one of us ran home and made a lemon meringue pie and delivered it to his house.

[01:24:30]So we got this building and we got a CETA person, which was like a national Peace Corps kind of position that was funded at the time. We got -- actually, we got three CETA positions so we could hire a director and two staff.

KAREN BREWSTER: So what is CEDA? C-E-D-A? Or S-E-D-A?

ROBIN BARKER: C-E-T-A (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act).

KAREN BREWSTER: C-E-T-A.

ROBIN BARKER: And so we hired a staff person or a director. And she was not Native, you know, college educated, able to run a budget and all that stuff. And two Native staff people. And, you know, they arrived. We found out we could not raise the Quonset hut. It would have fallen apart if we tried. So I said, "Okay, well then what we're going to do is we're going to build a floor and we're going to just make the floor level. And we're going to have to put some steps in there where it --" And we had the money to buy the lumber and I went to the lumber place, Swanson's, and ordered the lumber. And then he said, "Now are you a business or are you just buying this privately?" And I said, "Oh, we're a business." And he said, "So what's the name of the business?" I said, "It's Bull Dyke Builders." And he just kind of blanched. But from then on, whenever anybody went and bought anything, they had to say, "We're from Bull Dyke Builders." [laughter]

Anyway, so then we had a Saturday when we had a whole bunch of volunteers. You know, the building guy from the college and so on. And we built this floor, and then we put up the walls for an office. The back area was set up with some beds and the front area was, you know, kind of common space. And it quickly became a place where women kind of came and had coffee and just hung out. The undertaker in town gave us a box that was obviously shaped so a coffin could be shipped in it. And we turned it into a couch. It was very comfortable. I don't know. But anyway, it was crazy.

KAREN BREWSTER: That's great.

[01:27:35]

ROBIN BARKER: And then we started getting convictions. You know, we had people volunteer to go sit in on the trials. And we started getting convictions, because Victor, the DA, was determined that he was going to get a lot of convictions. And this was definitely an opportunity. And he believed in what we were doing. I mean, his wife made sure he did. And he eventually ended up -- the governor set up a women's commission, which no longer exists, sadly. But he made -- and everybody started collecting data. And so the governor made Victor kind of a

special assistant to the governor on women's issues or something with a particular emphasis on dealing with violence against women.

KAREN BREWSTER: What was Victor's last name?

ROBIN BARKER: Krumm. K-R-U-M-M. And his wife's name was Jean. And she was one of the original three.

KAREN BREWSTER: Jean or Jane?

ROBIN BARKER: Jean.

KAREN BREWSTER: J-E-A-N?

ROBIN BARKER: Uh-huh.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

[01:28:54]

ROBIN BARKER: She was one of the original three. Diane Carpenter, you may have heard of.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes.

ROBIN BARKER: She was very early on involved. Jim has a photograph of about 15 of the original women.

KAREN BREWSTER: It sounds like that's about how many there were?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Well, yeah. Yeah, it got a little bigger than that, but it wasn't much bigger than that. But --

[01:29:19]

KAREN BREWSTER: I was thinking too that starting to get convictions, part of it is the victims have to be willing to come forward and say, "This has happened to them."

ROBIN BARKER: Absolutely. Absolutely.

KAREN BREWSTER: And how did you get that to happen?

ROBIN BARKER: Well, they felt supported. You know, I think that was a really big part of it. And they knew that the police had some evidence and that the doctors would vouch for them. I mean, they felt supported. And also, we were talking out loud about it in the community. And so,

people were a little less fatalistic about it. This isn't just something that happens and it's done with. So yeah. I mean, most of them didn't. But some of them did.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, it was the -- as you say, empowering the women to know their strength and that they had the right to bring this up.

ROBIN BARKER: Right. Right.

[01:30:31]

KAREN BREWSTER: And that is not always -- As you said earlier, that, you know, the Yup'ik don't want to contradict. You know, go along with things.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so shifting that narrative --

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: -- must have been challenging.

ROBIN BARKER: I don't know that it was any more challenging than it is for all women. It's pretty daunting. But, yeah, it was -- So eventually then we got a quarter million dollars and built a building. I don't know how many beds it had. It had certainly more beds than the Quonset hut. And then, much later, when I wasn't in Bethel anymore, they got a big chunk of money and they built a big building. It's 40 beds. And they have a children's program and they have a men's program for domestic violence. They have security. Oh, my God. It was scary staying in the center. If you had a rape victim, who knew what her perpetrator was going to do?

KAREN BREWSTER: Or domestic violence.

[01:31:54]

ROBIN BARKER: Or domestic violence, probably even worse. Sometimes I would call -- You know, I'd be staying overnight with somebody who was beat to a pulp. And sometimes I would call the cops and say, "You know, there's some chance that this guy's going to come by." And they would say, "Well, we'll drive by occasionally." You know, what else could they do?

And the other thing was the Quonset hut only had one door. And so I went to Mr. Eddie Hoffman and said, "We need a window." And then as Bull Dyke Builders, I went and bought a window and put it in. God knows, you know, I just figured out how to put it in. And yeah, so we had a way out. Actually, there were two doors. There were two doors, but we needed a third escape besides a door that was in a sort of sheltered place.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

ROBIN BARKER: So anyway, so they ended up with this third building. And the interesting thing is we went out there for another occasion quite a few years ago. And the building -- we went over there and they gave me a tour. And the building itself is on the site of our house where the original answering machine was. They were just thrilled to hear that.

KAREN BREWSTER: Wow, that's so cool.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, it was. Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: That's very cool. And it's still called the Tundra Women's Coalition?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, it's still the Tundra Women's Coalition. Yeah. Or Collision, whichever you prefer.

[01:33:41]

KAREN BREWSTER: Any of the other early founders besides Jean and Diane, you can remember?

ROBIN BARKER: Tori Foote. Oh gosh, now I feel really bad.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Of drudging up names. I can picture all these faces. The names I knew perfectly well.

[01:34:08]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, okay. So were there -- You were talking about being fearful staying in the shelter. Were there ever any incidences?

ROBIN BARKER: No. There weren't. Not that I can remember. Nothing that resulted in anybody being injured or anything. I don't think there were. I don't know whether they were just terrified of us, or what.

And I remember, I would get so mad. And there was this one time when a woman, oh God, she had had too much to drink. She'd gotten in a truck with these guys. They were white guys, I have to say. And they drove down the river. It was winter. They drove down the winter (means river) and they raped her. And they threw her out of the truck without her coat. I don't think she had her pants. And drove away. And that young girl somehow survived and made her way back to town. And all she could say was, "I need my glasses." Her glasses had fallen in the truck. And I was so mad. The next day -- I mean, Jim was just horrified, but the next day I went to this guy's house and knocked on the door and said, "She wants her glasses." I don't know what I thought he was going to do. Then I went and looked in the truck and then I left. I didn't get the glasses.

KAREN BREWSTER: Didn't get the glasses? But she identified who the guy was?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: She knew. She was --

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah. We knew who they were. I don't remember whether she pressed charges or not. But she's lucky to have survived.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, and -- well, yeah. Amazing.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

[01:36:23]

KAREN BREWSTER: I was wondering too about the founders. Was it a mixture of Yup'ik and non-Native?

ROBIN BARKER: No. It was all non-Native women. And then, eventually, when we got our two Native CETA women, we got Native women kind of participating and hanging out. And eventually got Native women on the board. But it was a long time before we got any crisis volunteers that were Native.

KAREN BREWSTER: I'm hearing Jim's jazz music in the background.

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, is it going to be a problem?

KAREN BREWSTER: It seems like it just got louder.

ROBIN BARKER: Oh. Let me go see if he opened the door.

[01:37:10]

KAREN BREWSTER: Thank you. Well, I was thinking, too, you said that you'd get so angry and it's so hard to work in that world where there's so much tragedy. How did you process that and deal with that?

ROBIN BARKER: And it was dangerous. You know, it was dangerous. But I just was so angry. It propelled me.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes. Did it end up weighing on you? Or you didn't take it home with you?

ROBIN BARKER: I think I definitely ended up with some secondary trauma, which sort of manifested later in life, combined with some other things. But yeah, I think so. We didn't have any way to debrief, except sort of talk things with each other a little bit. But -- Yeah.

[01:38:10]

KAREN BREWSTER: That's what I was wondering is, yeah, that must have been hard. And how did that work? I mean, the volunteers must have known the victims. Or not necessarily?

ROBIN BARKER: Sometimes, not necessarily.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. It was a big enough community that you might not know everybody?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, sometimes. I had one domestic violence woman that I really formed a bond with. She ended up going back to college and then got a master's in counseling. She ended up the director of the child care center, or the -- not the child care center, the Head Start center in Bethel for a while. She got to be a very close friend. And I spent time with her kids. But I remember collecting clothes for the kids. She had run away with the children. You know, all of us kind of collected a lot of clothes. She ended up really doing something for herself.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. Well, that's what I was thinking is the satisfaction of a situation like that where you helped and you gave this woman an opportunity that she might not have had without the coalition's help.

[01:39:44]

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. And I stopped volunteering when I got pregnant. I slipped on the stairs in the middle of the night. And Jim just said, "No, you can't be doing this anymore." But I stayed as part of the thing. I was pretty busy with my son.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. So yeah, all of this was before you had Eric?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: All of this teaching?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, it was early on. You know, 'cause it started that first year when that rape happened. And that terrible car thing.

Yeah, the patty wagon thing was one of the women that -- this is a strange -- another strange story. One of the women that I -- was in a domestic violence situation. You know, I met her and I helped her. And she kind of was around town. I don't know. Well, she had left a village and I helped her find a place to live. She had a serious drinking problem. And one day -- one day I was at work. And she hadn't shown up -- oh, she got a job. But she hadn't shown up for her job. I

tried to call her. And I thought -- well, I just knew something was wrong. And so I borrowed the college van and I drove out to this little trailer. When I got there, the door was open. There were clothes strewn out on the ground. It was cold. And I went inside. There was blood all over the place. And she was unconscious, bleeding. And there had been a big fight. And I think it was with her sister. And I managed to rouse her. And I got her into the van. And we drove to the hospital. And, you know, the van was warm, and she started -- she had hypothermia. And she started to thaw out. And I've never seen anybody shake like that. I was afraid she would hit her head on the dashboard. And I saved her life. There's just no doubt about it. And I remember one of the doctors saying to her, "This woman saved your life. You'd be dead." You know, trying to get her to stop drinking, which that never works. But anyway, she sort of -- you know that thing about when you save somebody's life, you're kind of responsible for them? And she kind of felt that way. It was disconcerting. And so I helped her in various ways.

And then one day, I was at the Tundra Women's Coalition at the Quonset Hut, and some women came running. And they said that this woman was going to kill herself and jump in the river, which we were right on the river. So I went running down there. And -- well, first of all, I called the police. And I went running down there, and I talked her off the edge of the river, and the police came. And they threw us both in the paddy wagon. And I was mad, you know. We just got thrown all over the place. I was afraid she was going to get a concussion. You know, I got thrown all over the place. I don't know. Anyway --

KAREN BREWSTER: Why did they put you in there, though?

ROBIN BARKER: Well, because I wanted to accompany her to make sure she was okay. And they were perfectly happy to throw me in there. Yeah.

[01:44:07]

KAREN BREWSTER: So the year that you started the Tundra Women's Coalition, what year was that? Did we say that?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, it might have been '76.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: It was early. It was early. Maybe I'd been there a couple years. I don't know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Maybe less.

[01:44:31]

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. And then -- so you stopped volunteering. And did you stop working, too, while you were raising your son?

ROBIN BARKER: I did for a year. And then I went back to work half time, working for the birth to three program. I had been working for them full time, so I went back half time. And I was in charge of those developmental assessments. Man, that was frustrating. I tried everything.

KAREN BREWSTER: That sounds very challenging.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Well, I mean, my final decision was I decided to use the Denver Developmental Test. And it's the shortest, simplest test there is, that I knew of. And just kind of downplay what it meant. Check off the box that I had done it. And talk with them a little bit about the findings and what they meant and what they didn't mean.

[01:45:47]

KAREN BREWSTER: Because this was a requirement for the funding for this program?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Head Start has performance standards that Congress votes on, I mean. And they're probably -- they're like an old phone book, an old yellow pages. In fine print. Man, I knew that thing backwards and forwards. And you had to do what they said you had to do. And I think there were vast numbers of committees in DC of people who thought they had the brightest idea yet. And as time went on, it got less and less appropriate. As we hit the stage where everybody in Congress thought that children should learn their letters at two, and everybody who teaches should have a teaching degree. I knew that would be a disaster.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Yeah, 'cause Head Start, they didn't require a teaching degree?

ROBIN BARKER: No.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

ROBIN BARKER: No.

[01:46:59]

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. So did you work for Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation?

ROBIN BARKER: No. I just worked for RurAL CAP and the college.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: And at the child care center.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. And not -- nothing with the school district, either? This was all separate?

ROBIN BARKER: Hm-mm.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: No. I did end up -- Here, I ended up supervising student teachers.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: In elementary grades. You know, I had taught back in Vermont.

[01:47:28]

KAREN BREWSTER: Uh-huh. So you guys moved to Fairbanks when?

ROBIN BARKER: '87.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. And so that's -- you worked at the schools here?

ROBIN BARKER: Well, I worked for the university. Supervis -- for the School of Education.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. That was really interesting work.

[01:47:56]

KAREN BREWSTER: And what are your thoughts about being accepted into the Yup'ik community as a non-Native? How you and Jim seemed to have managed to have become quite accepted?

ROBIN BARKER: Well, one of the things was when I first started traveling, you know, I'd go to the village for the first time and do my thing, whatever. And then I'd go back, you know, six weeks later. And people would say, "You came back?" Because there were so many bureaucrats and people who just came flying through. And, you know, the fact that I just kept coming back, you know, I made friends. I didn't sleep at the teachers' quarters. You know, I stayed in people's households. And I brought groceries. I participated in whatever was going on. They tried to get me to play basketball, but I don't know how to dribble. They thought that was -- they actually got me out on the court one time 'cause they were short and they needed somebody. They watched me. First of all, I said, "What are the rules?" And they went, "Oh, maybe this isn't going to do." They found somebody else.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes, 'cause you're tall, so you would have been a very good basketball player.

ROBIN BARKER: I know. Yeah, they thought this will be great.

[01:49:41]

KAREN BREWSTER: That's funny. Well, yeah, you guys must have had quite some interesting experiences out traveling around. Going to fish camp and --

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we did stupid stuff. I was just talking with my friend Phyllis Morrow, who's now here. We moved here at the same time. There's a group of us that, you know, we raised our kids together. And they're really, really close friends. But anyway, we were talking yesterday about close calls that we had because we were stupid and did stuff. And people -- When Jim went to Antarctica, people would ask me, "Aren't you afraid for his safety?" And I'd go, "No. He's got a minder." They're really strict about where you could go and how you could go. And I said, "Man, he would disappear for ten days and I wouldn't even know where he was."

KAREN BREWSTER: Out in Bethel?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. He'd go out whale hunting and crazy stuff. But he was with guys who knew what they were doing.

And the other thing was, he has an absolutely unfailing sense of direction. And one time, we were going by snowmachine up to one of the villages where I had a really good friend. Annie. She was a Head Start teacher. And it was nighttime and it was blowing snow like you've never seen before. So I'm following him and the trail is -- and I can't see more than four feet around me. And the trail from his machine is blowing over. I can't see his trail at all. And so after a while -- I mean, I could see his light. After a while, his light disappeared and I was just stranded. I had no idea where to go from there. And I was there for -- I mean, one of the things that was a real problem was that Jim did not look back. And things would happen behind him. And he had the machine going and a beaver hat. There was no point in trying to shout. So I just stood there for quite a while and I started thinking, "Okay, well, if I turn around and go back, just try and head in a straight line, I'll hit the riverbank. And then I can work my way down to a village." And the next village was three miles down or something. I thought, "That's the only way I'm going to survive." And then he showed up.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, good.

ROBIN BARKER: He showed up. How the hell did he find me?

KAREN BREWSTER: He followed the trail back?

ROBIN BARKER: I don't know. Yeah, but it was blown over. And besides, he was traveling towards this village. How did he know how to get there?

KAREN BREWSTER: Had he been there before?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah. But there wasn't -- it wasn't like there were trees on the other side of the trail or anything.

[01:53:09]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I'm always amazed at how people find their way out there on the flat tundra that, from my perspective, has no landmarks. But for them, it does have landmarks. Those guys know. Out on the sea ice. It's amazing.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, yeah. Anyway, yeah. Jim came home one time and he was telling me about this guy who -- they were way out on the sea ice. And Jim said, "How did you find this?" And he said, "I know this country."

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: It was country to him.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. They just know.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. I don't know.

[01:53:47]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and you had snowmachines at that point. You weren't using dog teams?

ROBIN BARKER: No. They were too expensive. And a lot of work.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, you arrived just in time when snowmachines were starting to become the dominant thing.

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, no, they'd been around. You know, they were old, old snowmachines. During World War II, there was a story of a guy in Hooper Bay whose machine -- I don't know about machine parts, but he'd broken on his outboard, I guess. What is his outboard? Yeah. Some little machine part. And it was impossible to get parts during the war. And so he sat in the steambath every night and carved ivory parts, including the metal cast marks and everything, and put them in his machine and ran them until they broke. In the meantime, just kept --

KAREN BREWSTER: Wow.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. I mean, people were so ingenious.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, I know. Amazing.

ROBIN BARKER: So good with machines.

[01:54:57]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. I was thinking, too, about -- you mentioned this friend or that friend, if there was particular mentors or some of the people you worked with that really meant a lot to you?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. This friend of mine in Kwethluk, Annie. Annie Alexie. I don't know, we just really hit it off. We were born on the same day. She was supposedly a year older than I was because her father had bequeathed her a husband right when he died, and she was underage to get married. So her family took her to the magistrate, and the magistrate faked her birth certificate so she could get married. And she was terrified. She was like 15. And he was quite a bit older. And yeah, this is quite the story. He was a very patient man, and she said he was really wonderful. And they stayed married. They had five children.

And one time she called me, and she said, "My -- " I think his name was Alexie. Alexie Alexie. And she said, "He's going moose hunting. And I don't want to be alone." Of course, she had five children, but she didn't want to be alone, and would I come and stay with her? And I said, "Sure." So I went up to Kwethluk and did whatever we did during the day. And then we all crawled into bed. And we had this tiny little bedroom. And we had a baby and a toddler in bed with us. We had the double bed. And the three other kids on little beds that folded down or something, I don't remember. Anyway, the whole room was full of beds and kids sleeping. And so we're lying there in bed just talking, ready to go to sleep. And she said -- maybe she had been talking about her early marriage or something. And she said, "I don't know if I love my husband." And I said, "Well, you know, how do you mean?" And it became clear that she -- you know, she saw these romances in the movies with people just falling in love. And that had never happened to her. And I said, "Well, you know, Jim and I had a romance." I said, "But it's over now. And so now we respect each other, we enjoy each other's company. You know, all these different things. And that amounts to love." And she said, "Then I love my husband."

KAREN BREWSTER: That's very sweet.

ROBIN BARKER: So sweet. Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: That's a wonderful story.

ROBIN BARKER: Very sweet.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

[01:58:37]

ROBIN BARKER: And then there was Irene Price, rest her soul, in Scammon Bay. I stayed with her quite a lot. There's a great story that happened kind of the last time I stayed with her. I had actually been living here and I had gone out. When I did my master's program, I was writing

about these things about children. And I went out there and I stayed with her. And she had these three two-year-olds that she was taking care of during the day. I think she had -- I think she only had -- she had two of them in the household. One was her daughter's baby or something. She had foster kids and stuff. And it was spring. The snow was still really deep. But it was crusted on the top. So the grown-ups couldn't walk around on it, 'cause you'd just be in up to your armpits. But the kids could walk around on it. So they were all out playing 'cause it was spring and they were in their t-shirts and stuff. At one point, there was this loud bang. And one of the seven-year-olds - there were two seven-year-olds - one of them had thrown an ice ball and hit this plate glass window. It was one of the new houses, had a big plate glass window. And just slammed into the window. And Irene went out on the porch and just yelled. She just yelled. But she didn't direct her yelling at Kyle. She was just yelling out into the atmosphere. And then she came inside.

And after a while, after quite a while, the little girls were hungry. And so she got out -- And then Kyle came in, and typically for Yup'ik kids, he didn't take his coat off. This is more when they're visiting, but he was shy. So he backed himself against the wall and stood there with his coat on. And she invited him to come in. And she got out another -- but she got out these popcorn bags that you put in the microwave. And she got out four of them. And one by one, she popped them, gave one each to the little girls. And then she put one in for Kyle. And it didn't pop. It just lay there flat. And she took it out, and she looked at him, and she said, "Things kind of know." And it wasn't until I was on the plane going home that I went, "That's what it's all about." Animism. You know, it's the living, breathing world that you live in. I just thought that was so amazing.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

[02:02:05]

ROBIN BARKER: So amazing. She -- Those kids, they were all named after different people. And two of them were named after husband and wife, and -- or were they brother and sister? But anyway, their genders were mixed. And at one point, I sat there and I tried to figure out with all the kids and who they were named after, how they were related to each other. 'Cause they were related to each other as who they were. But there were also were -- all these relationships -- all these relationships about -- There were several of them.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Because of their naming?

ROBIN BARKER: Because of their naming. And so I got it all figured out. And I said, "Irene, listen to this." And then I enumerated all these different -- and so and so is her granddaughter and so and so is his brother, but blah, blah, blah. You know, how all those different people were related to each other. She just laughed her head off. She just laughed her head off. And I think it was because it was funny. And also because she thought it was hilarious that this gussak woman who, like gussaks everywhere, overthink everything, had taken the trouble to figure this all out.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, yeah they were -- Everybody in the village was related to everybody else anyway, right? So what difference did it make?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So yeah. So they're -- I mean, and that's kind of part of the point. Is that -- You know, this naming thing, it just cements what's already been cemented, even more so. You know, it's no wonder that kids who come to the university here have a real trouble. My friend, Annie, she didn't want to be alone. You are so connected.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Relationships matter.

ROBIN BARKER: And with the land. And with everything that's breathing around you. Yeah, it's mind boggling how different it is.

[02:04:34]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. So, you mentioned your master's.

ROBIN BARKER: Hm-mm.

KAREN BREWSTER: Can you talk a little bit about that?

ROBIN BARKER: Well, yeah. I was just so interested in all of these thoughts that were going around in my head about Yup'ik babies and toddlers. And I don't know why I wanted a master's degree, but just 'cause I'm curious and I liked to go to school, I guess. And I had some wonderful teachers there. Perry Gilmore was the head of --

KAREN BREWSTER: So that was here at UAF?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, at UAF. Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: That was the Ed Department?

ROBIN BARKER: Hm-mm.

KAREN BREWSTER: I've heard Perry Gilmore's name.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Oh, she was a wonderful teacher. Just a wonderful teacher. And David Smith, her husband, he was also a wonderful teacher. But Perry was a mentor and a real inspiration. And her whole approach really was sociolinguistics. And not so much anthropology, but the role of culture in education programs and so on. And so I got a real dose of -- Well, I got a tremendous amount of support for what I was thinking about. And there was no problem with my writing my thesis about all this stuff. I didn't have to talk about second graders or whatever. Yeah, and she really was part -- she was at the University of Pennsylvania for a while. She also did some work for Sesame Street at one point. But she was really interested in sociolinguistics. And I found that fascinating. I found that absolutely fascinating. You know, understanding discourse and how it works. And it had some relevance to what I was thinking about.

[02:06:53]

KAREN BREWSTER: And so your masters is in education?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And what specifically? About Yup'ik toddlers and infants?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, my thesis was about that. So I did my general coursework. But whenever I had to write a paper or whatever, mostly that's what I was writing about. I wrote about -- I have a piece in one of Phyllis Morrow and Bill Schneider's book that was a paper that I wrote ("Seeing Wisely, Crying Wolf: A Cautionary Tale on the Euro-Yup'ik Border" in "When Our Words Return: Writing, Hearing, and Remembering Oral Traditions from Alaska and the Yukon," 1995). And it starts out with the story about how the crane got blue eyes. Maggie Lind story. You know, it looks at how a non-Native person interprets the moral of the story, kind of, and how completely different it is from a Yup'ik point of view.

And then it sort of morphs into a story about -- One time when I was observing a student teacher here in one of the elementary schools -- and they always gave me the Native students. And this young woman was Athabascan. And she told the kids a story about how she was out with her grandmother, and they had a trapline for rabbits. And one day they sent her out to check the traps. And she described taking the dead rabbits out of the traps and their stiff bodies, packing them. And the kids are looking more and more horrified as she goes along. And then she comes on a trap where the rabbit's still alive, and she lets the rabbit go. And she goes home. And the next day, her grandmother goes out and checks the traps. And she comes back and she says, "You let that rabbit go." And I don't know how the story ended, but the teacher thought that she was talking -- she was telling the children about how important it is to harvest the game that presents itself to you. And the students thought, "Well, this is about getting in trouble for killing all those rabbits." Or whatever.

KAREN BREWSTER: I thought it would be about the importance of being honest.

ROBIN BARKER: Oh.

KAREN BREWSTER: We all interpret it differently.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Interesting.

ROBIN BARKER: So anyway.

[02:09:54]

KAREN BREWSTER: So just to kind of round out. After you moved to Fairbanks, you got your masters, and then you worked for the Department of Ed? What else did you do here in Fairbanks?

ROBIN BARKER: Shortly. Yeah, for a while. I did different things. I took a year, or was it two years, doing art in the Art Department. Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: What kind of art?

ROBIN BARKER: I did a lot of drawing and printmaking. And painting. I did quite a bit of painting. Yeah. I'm fairly accomplished.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: But I haven't done anything. Kes Woodward, every time he sees me, he's like, "Are you painting?" But yeah, I haven't done anything with it for years.

[02:10:43]

KAREN BREWSTER: And is there something you retired from as a perfect job?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, things I --

KAREN BREWSTER: That you retired -- I mean, you stopped working?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, well, I worked for Tanana Chiefs (Conference) for about four years. Again, working with three to five (year old) Head Start programs in the Athabascan villages. And that was a really different experience, 'cause the culture is so different. I would say that just temperamentally, I was a much better fit for Yup'ik country. Just much better. I had a tough time with that sort of, I don't know, you're guilty until you're proven innocent kind of approach. And I didn't stay in people's homes. There were Head Start centers, and I was expected to sleep on the floor in the Head Start center. And so I didn't make the same kind of friendships. Yeah so, I just didn't get as much of a window. I just didn't.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, you weren't immersed in it as much. In Bethel --

ROBIN BARKER: Not at all. I was living here.

KAREN BREWSTER: -- you were going to the villages, and you were living in Bethel. And here, Fairbanks is quite different from the villages.

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So there were a lot of reasons that I just didn't get quite as connected. Yeah. I liked going to Holy Cross 'cause it was half Yup'ik.

KAREN BREWSTER: It's a beautiful village, too.

ROBIN BARKER: It's a beautiful village. Yeah. Huslia is a beautiful village. I went there. Yeah. And Kaltag.

KAREN BREWSTER: And then --

ROBIN BARKER: Kalskag. Both. I get them confused.

[02:12:51]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. Well, I was going to say, when we interviewed Jim about his photo books and his work, it sounded like you also did a lot to support that and help put those together and do the writing.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, I did, for the book. And I generally, you know, when he had to write a letter. He's not a writer. Yeah. And we traveled together some. Mostly, we traveled separately. But once in a while, we kind of -- once in a while -- I don't think our work ever overlapped now that I think about it.

KAREN BREWSTER: When you were in Bethel?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, that's what I was wondering if whether he came with you on any of those trips? Village trips.

ROBIN BARKER: Once he came to Eek because we decided to -- I decided to snowmachine there. It's like 80 miles or something. And it was bitter cold and windy. And I don't know what I was thinking. It was one of those stupid things I did. And he said, "Well, you're not going by yourself." And so he went to Eek with me that time. When we got there, my friend said, "You came here on snowmachine in this weather? Are you out of your mind?"

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes.

[02:14:21]

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Oh, it was cold. But I took my mother to Eek one time. She came up to visit. And so I took her on a field trip with me. And I had to work. You know, I had to go on home visits and stuff. And so the village policeman -- well, they were first -- First, they were all really excited I was bringing my mother, you know. And I got on a CB radio. "Did you bring your mom?" You know. And I said, "Yeah." And I tried to put her on. She was too shy. And the village policeman decided that his job was -- while I was working, he would take her wherever she wanted to go. And so then all the ladies got on their CB radios and organized where she

would go. Whose house she would go to, and then for tea. And then whose house would she go to next. And they just -- you know, for three days they just shuffled her around.

KAREN BREWSTER: That's great.

ROBIN BARKER: She just loved it. She just loved it. It was -- and, you know, I'm sure it was like a really different experience for her.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and those women didn't maybe speak much English, did they?

ROBIN BARKER: By that time. Yeah, they did.

KAREN BREWSTER: It was more common?

ROBIN BARKER: It was later. And generally, you know, the teachers spoke English.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. I was thinking like the Elder women in the community.

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, the Elder -- the really Elder -- But these were all the moms.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, these were all the Head Start moms?

ROBIN BARKER: These were all the moms.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. So she got to meet all the babies.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, she loved babies. Yeah. Somebody taught her some string games.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. Fun.

[02:16:05]

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. So that was quite -- I had to have a baby to get my dad to come.

KAREN BREWSTER: So he came to see you in Bethel?

ROBIN BARKER: Once. Yeah. And we took them up -- We had friends with a homestead out of Aniak, and we took them up there. That was quite an experience.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: Especially for my dad. My mom, when she was a child, she kind of got dragged all over the world. Algiers and --

KAREN BREWSTER: What did her parents do?

ROBIN BARKER: Her father was -- He was basically an ethnomusicologist. He taught at Columbia (University) for a while. He spoke many languages. And he -- He was very integrated into Roma communities. And so he kind of followed those Roma people around in North Africa and Spain. She lived in Seville for a while. So she had some cross-cultural experience. But as a very young child. So I don't know if that made any difference.

KAREN BREWSTER: But your dad did not?

ROBIN BARKER: No. No, I think his total mastery of middle class or whatever English was "Fill 'er up."

[02:17:30]

KAREN BREWSTER: He was very much the academician, I take it?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Yeah. And he grew up in a really upper crust family in New York. And went to Princeton.

JIM BARKER: Remember, he was in the Second World War for --

ROBIN BARKER: But he was a Naval officer. You know, of course, he was an officer.

JIM BARKER: Right. For the -- in the last few months he was on a ship.

ROBIN BARKER: In the Pacific.

JIM BARKER: And it was not -- never any -- any --

ROBIN BARKER: No battles.

JIM BARKER: No battles there.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

[02:18:01]

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. He was the director of the University Press at Princeton. And he invented the concept of publish or perish.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh. I didn't know that needed to be invented.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. Well, what was going on was, you know, in Europe there were all these journals for different disciplines. People were, you know, contributing their research. So there was a lot of -- I mean, there was no Internet, so that's how they knew about what they were doing. And there wasn't here in the States. People were just doing their thing in isolation. And so, you know, his idea was that we needed journals. And we needed papers to contribute to the journals. And so, his idea was, at that the universities, they should require the faculty to be writing papers. So he invented that term.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

ROBIN BARKER: Much to my chagrin now.

KAREN BREWSTER: And what was his area of specialty that he taught in?

ROBIN BARKER: No, he was the director of the University Press.

KAREN BREWSTER: The Press, I know. But did he --?

ROBIN BARKER: No, he didn't teach.

KAREN BREWSTER: He didn't teach?

ROBIN BARKER: No, it was a full-time job.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: For sure. They put out a lot of books.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. Because I didn't know if he had a background in literature or --

ROBIN BARKER: He had an undergraduate degree, double major in engineering and literature.

KAREN BREWSTER: Interesting.

ROBIN BARKER: He was Einstein's editor before he became the director. He said Einstein was very kind.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, well, that's nice. So what was your father's name?

ROBIN BARKER: Herbert Bailey. He's pretty well known in the --

KAREN BREWSTER: I would think probably in that --

ROBIN BARKER: In the publishing world. Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: In the University Press publishing world. Yeah. So, I don't know what else --

[02:20:14]

ROBIN BARKER: So there was a great deal of emphasis in my household in language.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes. I can see that. Which is maybe why you are a good writer.

ROBIN BARKER: Well, yeah. I -- He and a friend of his invented this program for the junior high where they found a bunch of writers in the community to volunteer. And this brilliant teacher, at the beginning, on Monday, he would tell a story. And he would tell a story that illustrated some kind of writing concept, like writing from near to far or whatever. And then -- I guess he did this on Tuesdays. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, we would write a little essay illustrating that technique. And then over the weekend, little groups of us would be assigned to a writer. And the writer would take our essays and read them and meet with us on Monday to talk with us about what we had done. And so, they were called the correctors. And my corrector was John McPhee.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, my goodness.

ROBIN BARKER: So I did learn a little bit about writing.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: It was a great program.

[02:21:42]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, that sounds like a great idea. So working with your husband on this book or his books, how did that work with you guys?

ROBIN BARKER: It was fun. It was really fun. We never argued about anything. We did an interview in Juneau after it came out. And you could tell that interviewer was just trying to get us to talk about some time when we had disagreed. And it just -- And finally, I said, "You know, we just never disagreed." I said, "Don't ask us to build a flight of stairs together, 'cause it ain't going to happen." But this was great. It was just wonderful. He had all these field notes, which I can't find. I've looked and looked.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, they must be somewhere.

ROBIN BARKER: They're here somewhere. And he would kind of rough them into some kind of chapter. And then I would take that and I would add to it quite a bit and juggle it around and so on. It was an interesting writing project for me, because it's written in the first person from his point of view. And so I worked really hard to kind of preserve his voice and not let my voice come into it too much. I think it does so in the dance chapter, 'cause I pretty much wrote that one. But yeah, it was really fun.

KAREN BREWSTER: Good. Well, I was thinking, too, it might -- It allowed you to kind of re-live some of the experiences.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, yeah. And it was pretty fresh, you know. We hadn't been here very long. Yeah, at one point, he handed me this one chapter. I can't remember which chapter it was. And it was just a mess. It was a mess. And I worked and worked and worked on it. And, you know, as we did, when I got done, I gave it to him to read. And he came to me and he said, "Boy, I wrote that one pretty well. You didn't have to do much." Well, I guess I preserved his voice.

[02:24:20]

KAREN BREWSTER: And I was thinking, is your name -- I mean, this book "Always Getting Ready," is --

ROBIN BARKER: That's kind of a --

KAREN BREWSTER: Has Jim's name on the front.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. It's --

KAREN BREWSTER: Did you get any credit for your writing?

ROBIN BARKER: Well, it says "with the assistance of" or something. But it really should have both our names on it. What happened was, when we went and talked initially with the Press (University of Washington Press), and we had a portfolio of photographs. And our idea was that it would have very little text. That it was a photographic book. And they wanted a text. And, you know, we had sat there with the editor that first time and just told stories. And when we got done, she said -- we said, "Well, we've got somebody in mind to write it." She said, "No, you guys have to write it." And it just sort of got a lot bigger than we envisioned. And at the same time, you know, we had to really fight to have those photographs be full page. We had one place where there's like -- and they had originally sent us the design. We had been very specific in the contract. But whoever designed it, it looked like a magazine. And, you know, it didn't feature the photographs. And that was the whole idea. And so we made them redesign it. In fact, we flew to Seattle and sat down in a day and redesigned the thing. And yeah, we were mad when it came. We were in Maine with my dad, and we showed it to him and he said, "No, no, no, no." But anyway, so it was sort of still in my head that it was Jim's photographic book. And so, he wanted

my name on the cover. And I said, "No, no, no, it's your photographic book." And so that's how it happened. I regret it. That's the first time I've admitted that. But, I kind of regret it.

[02:26:32]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I think having the text in there adds to it. It helps you understand more than just having the photo.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, I think now. I think it's the way it should be with those photographs featured the way they are.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right, but having some text with it, you know, for people who don't know the area and the history and the lifestyle.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And it shows how both of you, you were immersed in place. And having both the text and the photos just deepens that.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

JIM BARKER: It was kind of interesting when we went in to see the head of the Press. And just instantly, very quickly, I had this feeling that she was, in a sense, saying, "This is what we want. I mean, we think that this is very good."

ROBIN BARKER: "We think this is a book."

JIM BARKER: Yeah, right.

ROBIN BARKER: Was the point of our visit.

JIM BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. And that's encouraging to have the publisher's --

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah, she -- We had like a half hour appointment, and I think we were there for an hour and a half.

[02:27:53]

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I was going to say, you're very lucky. A lot of times publishers, they go, "Yeah, no, that's not what we want. Goodbye."

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: So to have them be so encouraging.

JIM BARKER: Right. Yeah.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. No, she said, "We're going to do this." Right off. Without even going to her editorial board.

KAREN BREWSTER: That's great.

ROBIN BARKER: So at the end -- Yeah, at the end of that meeting, Jim says, "You know, I think you might want to know that Robin's father is Herbert Bailey." And she just grinned.

KAREN BREWSTER: So she knew who he was?

ROBIN BARKER: I think he had sort of mentored her.

JIM BARKER: That's right. She had met him, so yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, that's funny.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. And when we negotiated the contract -- You know, they sent us a contract. And we changed it quite a lot and sent it back. And she said, "I think you have been getting some extra advice."

JIM BARKER: Yeah, right.

[02:28:58]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes, definitely. So now you've lived in Fairbanks way longer than you lived in Bethel?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. We raised our kid here. It was the best place for him.

KAREN BREWSTER: Are there things you miss about Bethel?

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: You still seem so very connected.

ROBIN BARKER: I still miss it, yeah. I miss the people. I do not miss the weather, but I'm not crazy about the weather here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. I miss the people.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. 'Cause it does seem like it's still very much a part of, for both of you, who you are and your identity.

ROBIN BARKER: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: And it really had great meaning to you.

ROBIN BARKER: Right. And I've talked with, you know, our Bethel friends, as they're known, you know, about -- You know, it may be true for a lot of people that we came of age. We became adults, basically, at that time. And we had our children. And I think that that's just such a seminal part of life that, you know, it's really important. I don't know. Maybe it's not true for other people that we --

[02:30:26]

JIM BARKER: One thing I should mention is that, as Robin has described, her father -- my parents -- my father was a -- taught engineering and such at Pullman, Washington.

KAREN BREWSTER: Uh-huh. Right.

JIM BARKER: And so, in other -- in the same way, we were both kind of --

ROBIN BARKER: Frat brats.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

JIM BARKER: That's right.

KAREN BREWSTER: Children of academia?

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

JIM BARKER: Yes. Yeah.

[02:31:00]

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, well, we didn't talk -- we talked about how you met.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: But then, how you ended up getting married? Did you get married in Bethel?

ROBIN BARKER: No. Um, we -- we were lying in bed one day, and I said to Jim, "You know, this fall, we will have been together 10 years. We should do something about that." And he said, "Maybe we should get married." And -- and, uh, so I said, "Well, yeah, maybe we should." And so, we were in Maine, which is a gathering place for my family. Everybody was there, and --

JIM BARKER: And every summer, we would -- we'd go to Maine.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, every summer you'd go to Maine?

JIM BARKER: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah. And have a big family gathering. And my parents would always put on a lobster dinner. And so, we thought, "Well, we'll get married the afternoon of the lobster dinner, and that'll be our celebration." And so -- so, um, we took my youngest brother out, and -- and we told him -- we went for dinner, and we told him, "We're going to get married on Thursday," or whatever it was. And he sort of shuddered, and I said, "And I'm not telling mom." And he went, "Oh, okay." 'Cause my mother would have gone nuts and ruined everybody's vacation. And so -- so, we didn't tell anybody except my brother. And so, the afternoon that we, um, were supposed to go to the Justice of the Peace, we took my parents for a walk. "We have something to tell you." And -- and my mom later said that she thought we had crashed their car. I don't know why she thought that. But -- but we told her we were getting married, and they were all happy. And my mom -- I could see my mom was imagining something in the university chapel, which is like a cathedral, at home, and all her friends and stuff. And I -- she said, "Well, um, you know, when -- when do you plan to do this?" And I said, "In about half an hour." And -- and so we went over to the Justice of the Peace, who had a beautiful flower garden. And got married there.

KAREN BREWSTER: Nice.

ROBIN BARKER: With just my parents. Yeah.

[02:33:41]

KAREN BREWSTER: And yeah, so none of Jim's family came to Maine for the gathering?

ROBIN BARKER: No. No. And we -- we went back to the house, and people were coming up from sailing and swimming and playing tennis and stuff. They were sort of gathering for the cocktail hour. And my brother says, "Why are you wearing a dress?" And I said, "Well, 'cause we just got married." Everybody was like -- So then we had this big lobster dinner. And the dining room -- big, long dining room, big, long table with French doors facing the ocean and the bay. And after -- after we had sat there for two hours talking, or four hours or whatever it was, all of a sudden there was these fireworks coming up out of -- From the opposite shore.

KAREN BREWSTER: Uh-huh.

ROBIN BARKER: Big firework thing. And I turned around and I said to my dad, "You shouldn't have." [laughter] And I don't know, it turned out there was some kind of town celebration of some kind.

KAREN BREWSTER: That's great.

ROBIN BARKER: Yeah.

[02:34:53]

KAREN BREWSTER: All right. Well, I probably totally exhausted you with all of this talking.

ROBIN BARKER: Oh, it's been really fun. It's been really fun. I don't know how long we've talked. Geez, a long time.

KAREN BREWSTER: And I'm sure you have many, many, many more stories.

ROBIN BARKER: I only got through like a third of my early childhood baby stuff.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. Well, I say if you want to keep going, but I was thinking you maybe want to take a break.

ROBIN BARKER: I think I'm done for today. Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. Okay. Great. Thank you.