

**EI-1495**

**MARGARET SERPA**

**BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 2, 1945**

**INTERVIEW DATE: JANUARY 13, 2009**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 63**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: ELENA LOCASCIO**

**ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: MARGARET'S SISTERS CLARA (EI-1493),  
ANDREA (EI-1494), MARY (EI-1496), AND MARIE AURELIA (EI-1498),  
AND HER BROTHER HERBERT (EI-1497) WERE ALSO  
INTERVIEWED.**

**THE AZORES, 1952**

**AGE: 6**

**SHIP: RIBEIRA GRAND**

**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES:**

**THE AZORES: MAIA, ST. MICHAEL**

**UNITED STATES: CAMBRIDGE AND SOMERVILLE, MA**

LEVINE: Okay, today is January the thirteenth, the year 2009. I'm here with Margaret Serpa, who came with most of the other members of her family who had been born by then in 1952 from the Azores. This is Janet Levine for the Statue of Liberty and the Ellis Island immigration museum. We've already discussed on another tape for the "Treasures From Home" two items that the family is donating – her grandmother's wedding dress and her father's wedding jacket. So now, if you would start this tape please, say your name, your birth date, and where you were born.

SERPA: Yes. My name is Margaret Serpa. My birth date is December 2, 1945. I was born in the village of Maia in St. Michael, Azores.

LEVINE: Okay. And “Maia” is M-A-I-A?

SERPA: Yes, that’s correct.

LEVINE: Okay. And, let’s see – well, when you think about the Azores and your life there, were you part of the group that went back after fifty years?

SERPA: Yes. Yes, I was. When I left there I was so very young, I don’t have a -- a vivid memory of having lived there as a young child. However, when I went the first time as a young woman -- as my sister Helen and I, it was my dad and Teresa and my uncle -- when we arrived in the village, what was very familiar were the smells of the island. Nothing visually was familiar, but the smells were very -- the same as I had remembered. And it was really -- pulls at you, because I didn’t realize that anything like that could be familiar or happen. So that was my first visit.

Helen at the university, but we spent two weeks again at the Azores and each time loved it more and more. And when we went back -- next time was when we had our fiftieth anniversary for my parents, and I went with my husband, my two children -- not my daughter -- and the whole extended family went. And that was so, so special.

My husband, as we were there the first few days, he actually said, “You know, Margaret, why don’t we just stay here? This is a perfect place to live and work and bring up our children.” And at the time, I r -- said to him, “What would we do here?” I couldn’t imagine myself in such a small, isolated place, as quaint as it was – it was so lovely – and very modern by that time in terms of today.

However, now I’ve gone back in the last six years four times. I just got back a week ago. And that now is where I want to spend – at least about 50% of my retirement life. M -- my sister Helen and I are really considering buying property, we looked at something over the week, and spending half if not more of our retirement years there.

LEVINE: Well, what does it mean to you to have started out life in the Azores? I mean, how does that figure into your whole being?

SERPA: Well, it’s not so much my life in the Azores, it was really the experience growing up here in my family, and then growing up isolated without extended family members. Because my mother’s family really didn’t have much to do with us, they lived in Rhode Island.

We were pretty much by ourselves with my parents’ friends from Maia, but we grew up without relatives until we were in our late teens. And then when my cousins came, it just enriched -- at least me, I don’t know if my sisters feel the same way, I think they do -- but having grown up

without extended members, just all of us in the family, it was an experience that we felt badly that we missed having had that.

So (coughs) as a young adult, I really learned Portuguese, relearned it, I learned to read and write it, I went to the university to read and to write Portuguese, and I had tremendous interest in learning more. Because what I saw as a young woman going back was so much richness of family life and culture that I didn't experience growing up here. There was a void and a disconnect.

Now, as an older person, I've raised my own family, I want to go back to some of those roots, the mo -- the more simplicity of life, and look at more the live the day-to-day relationships that are important that are hard to do in industrialized lifestyle that we have here. So I've made a -- a little bit of a full circle -- that I'm ready to make that transition.

LEVINE: As a six-year old coming here, first of all, how would you describe yourself? What kind of a little girl at six were you?

SERPA: Well, I'm told now I was cute, I look like one of my aunts, and I have pictures that I-- I can see that resemblance, my godmother. And I was talkative. I take after my father actually, and we were all obedient so that my mother never talked about us being badly-behaved, you know, because she held us -- to toe the line. I remembered just a little bit of my trip, I don't remember ever really going out of the home, because we were very sheltered. We were in the home, outside with a lot of animals,

cows and horses, and my mother kept us pretty much in the house as young children.

Even my oldest children – sisters – don't remember much going into the ocean. We were just maybe a thousand feet from the ocean, but we didn't do that. My mother didn't do it as a young person and she didn't bring us to the beach. So we were really in our home with my mom and my grandmother.

LEVINE: So what did you do? Did you play? You probably didn't do tasks at that age.

SERPA: No, no. Played with little sticks, like jacks, and little [not understood] with rocks, things like that, because we didn't go out, we played in the house. And I remember my mother made some sort of a doll with like a sock for us. We had that. And I played with Helen, who was younger, and with Louis, my younger brother – you know, we played together. There were enough of us around that we didn't need other children. The older ones took care of us.

LEVINE: Did you have any sense about when you were told you were leaving? Did you want to go? Did you have any expectations as a child?

SERPA: No, I don't have any recollection of that at all. The only reco-- a couple things that I recall as a young person was vaguely when my grandfather died. I don't recall my grandfather, but I remembered my uncle coming

into the house, from his home, where my grandfather was living -- my father's dad -- and then the disruption and commotion when he announced that his father had just passed away. And I remember people crying and commotion and being a little bit afraid because my grandfather had died. That's a vivid memory.

Another one is just during the night in the winter -- a couple of times I did this -- I'd get up out of bed and go down to where my mother had corn, silk corn, but it was cooked. And I remembered going there sneaking corn and eating it during the night because my mother wouldn't let us have it whenever we wanted it. So I remember, like, being devious and going down sneaking and eating it. But overall, that's r -- really all I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the voyage?

SERPA: A little bit. I remember being -- getting all dressed up, because my mother dressed us up very nicely, she made all our clothes. During the voyage, because we were a little family -- I mean, a big family, and not other passengers, they kept us in a -- a -- a room, a state room with my mom. They brought our meals so that we were very happy there because we had a lot of comfort.

And -- However, one night I do remember on the journey feeling very afraid, and feeling the boat was moving, the ship was moving a lot. And I remember hearing a loud noise and sometimes when I was younger I used to have this nightmare of the noise. And I -- In my imagination, I

thought I constructed this myself, and in recent years my sister told me this was true, that I thought a whale was trying to sink our ship and that we would die.

I have since learned that in fact there was a whale near the ship and they were blowing the sirens and the horns to try to get the whale -- whales -- out of the area so the ship could move. (laughs) I remember being afraid that it was during the night, that we might drown because the whales were in the way. As a young child, that's how I remember it.

Then when we arrived at Ellis Island, I had remembered my mother telling us -- and of course this was in Portuguese -- I -- because we'd ask, "How do we know when we get there?" because we had never been on a boat or even a taxi when we went to the airport -- to the city. So she said, "You'll know when we get there 'cause you'll see a beautiful lady in the harbor."

So, in my childish ways, I was expecting a beautiful lady, so I remembered my mother being very happy and the rest of us and I was pulling at my mother's skirt and all I saw was the big green thing and I was a little bit afraid because it was so big and it was ugly. And I said, "Mommy, where's the beautiful lady that you said would be here?" She says, "This is the beautiful lady." I said, "But she's ugly, and she's not beautiful." (laughs) My mother [not understood] "She's the beautiful lady." That's the memory I have of that.

LEVINE: Your mother was -- was happy to be getting to this country?

SERPA: She w -- was absolutely delighted and relieved to be coming -- returning -- back to the United States, where she had been. She had left with her mother and her father and her brother a little bit against her wishes during the Depression, and it was very lonely for her there. So she was happy to be coming back so that -- one, she wanted to come back, but also because her children would have better opportunities and to go to school.

There were no opportunities for us there. Not for all the girls, and certainly for my brother, who was in the middle of this brood of girls. And my mother was determined that none of the girls would work on the farm. So— you can't survive in a farm unless you have labor. And although other farms had girls laboring there, and the tea factory —my parents did not want us to do. So -- They wished t -- to -- my mother to come back here, my father then to immigrate prior to that.

LEVINE: How would you describe your mother's temperament?

SERPA: Well, um, in recent years, she was very mellow and very sweet. In my growing up years -- well, she was very different. She was very strict. She, um, did not let us do a lot of things that were normal for children our age. She was very protective. Uh, we were all very good in school so she didn't have problems with us in school. There weren't behavior, discipline issues for us -- to deal with and come home. You know, my mother and father had very good children, but she was a bit -- quite a bit severe. She didn't smile much. M -- My father smiled all the time and

laughed and – but he worked outside all day. And he would come home and he was always happy.

My mother, I realize now, as a older woman myself, was going through a lot of stresses herself, emotionally. And taking care of my grandmother was very harsh. She had a big challenge with all of us – large, large family – plus she took other children in. And she did great work with other people who needed assistance. Anytime anybody in the years that we were growing up needed help – translation, going to doctor's – my mother was the one that went. So -- and she liked doing that.

But the home life – she was quite severe. And, n -- not – I mean, in her look, when she looked at us, we all were obedient. Occasionally she would give out a yell. She wasn't violent with my dad or with us, and anyway they were not – uh, parents, who uh – had physical, um, uh – spanking their children even – they didn't — a look on my mom, and I wish I knew that look, y -- w-- we behaved, we straightened right up.

Plus, my older sisters also help contain us, particularly Aurelia, who would say, "Well, you know, we gotta do this, so everything will be done, and Mom will be fine." You know? So my oldest sister, Mary, would do cooking, but Aurelia would do the housekeeping, also she would be like a second mother – set up what we would do, how we would have to do it – it was always done well because Aurelia taught us.

Aurelia was really the one teaching us, you know? My mother was like the CEO (Levine laughs) – it was Aurelia doing the -- the teaching of us

as the younger ones. We would have time – by a certain time on Saturday, all these things had to be done. We'd have lunch ready by Mary, and we'd be all done by one.

So, you know, Sunday afternoon, we could relax, watch tv, and – and enjoy our afternoon and the weekend. But it Aurelia who – uh, liked, c—co—uh, housekeeping, liked managing, and she liked to take care of us. So that I have warm memories of growing up with my sister Aurelia. We would confide in her, and less so about my mother, you know, we were so much younger, but we always knew we could tell Aurelia things and she would guide us. She—She was very sweet.

Levine: So in a way, the family -- is this a fair statement ,that they were mainly in the home? Except you went to school, but mainly your life revolved around the home just as, just as it did in the Azores.

Serpa: Yes, uh, it just got a little bit more complex, 'cause we're growing up. My mother's memory of her experience growing up in Fall River - she left when she was sixteen - was crystallized. She didn't have the freedom of the young teen and all of that, so we didn't either. She, um, raised us as though she were – we were sixteen and growing up in Fall River. She actually had more freedom as a young woman than we had growing up here with her. She could go to movies every week, she -- she had violin lessons, she worked a little bit in a bakery for her brother. She -- she had these freedoms. We didn't have any of those.

She was afraid, I think, you know? That's how I see it. Uh, she, uh, kept us in line and- and we didn't have much freedom. The growing up years, what became nice was when my older brother Herb was in high school and he played sports, and he was popular and he was very good. And my mother took pride in that. And then when Louis, who's younger, became, um, again playing sports, but he was on debate teams and other things. Then my mother got involved in school clubs at the school, and she didn't do that for the girls because by now, r-raising us, that work was almost done. She had more time.

So my mother became very friendly and sweet was when my brother Louis was in high school. And she would come back and talk about the - - the mother's club that they decided to have, and – and, you know, I said, "M – Mummy's different now." She had a life outside of the house. Although she never drove, she would go on the [could not understand] up to the high school for the meetings. But she would talk about the moms and what they were planning to raise money for and all of that. So that's when I saw my mom different. Very sweet and engaging and enjoying her family, you know? Because most of them were raised, there were only three left. (laugh) Um, so it wasn't such a chore.

Levine: When you first got here, do you remember any things in this country that struck you as different and new?

Serpa: Well, everything was new, because I just had very limited experience. But I remembered the drive from New York. I was six, so I was tiny, and Helen, who's a li- a year and a half younger, they placed me in one of my uncle's cars and we were sitting on the, uh, um, on the floor of the car.

And I had never really been in a car except once, that was going to the port. And it- it was late at night, we were tired and we were all si – I was sitting there.

And in my memory, I was thinking, “Our life is gonna be so good in America. They don’t even have roads, they have a carpet.” W -- like driving on a carpet because it was so smooth. And I remembered falling asleep a little bit and then waking up and, I said, they had music playing. And-uh-uh-a vivid memory of being comforted. Life is gonna be good because the roads were already so beautiful. I -- I didn’t see the road, I just felt the road. And it was comforting. Um, you know?

Levine: So when you got here, did you start school right away?

Serpa: We got here in October, mid-October, and I started, uh, in first grade in the Cambridge public schools. I was older than most children because, uh, in December I was turning seven. I had never been to school. Uh, at-at seven in Portugal the time is when you start first grade, so we -- we came in October, I wasn’t even old enough to start. However, when my mother took me to enroll, uh, in Cambridge at the time children at four and a half were enrolled in school.

Levine: This was kindergarten?

Serpa: Ye -- this was -- I was enrolled in first grade.

Levine: Oh, first grade.

Serpa: S- So all the children were... m-uh, much younger than I was, but I was not skilled and I remembered, you know, enjoying school. I remember the teacher with flash cards, but we were the only non-English speaking family in the whole school. S -- So, I remembered, uh, my teacher paying particular lot of good attention with me. And I remember having friends and I remember the teacher, like, spending time which I know now was flash cards and phonics.

And at the end of the school year, the teacher – my mother tells me this – the teacher recommended to my mom that I should be kept back because I didn't know enough to go to second grade. And my mother said, um, that she didn't think I should g- be kept back, 'cause I was bigger than the other children. I was more than a year older. And that, in the summer, I would learn English playing with the kids outside. So learning English, my mother didn't see was the problem. That, um, she said, "She'll be fine, so put her on trial and if she doesn't do well after a couple months, put her back into first grade."

So I -- I remembered going to second grade feeling I had to prove myself because I didn't want to- to go back. And knowing that I didn't do enough, whatever that was, I didn't know, but I didn't know enough to stay in second grade unless I did very well. So, I worked very hard and I remembered reading – in those days, the teachers didn't have many books and libraries like today.

But I remember reading the Bobbsey Twins books. Every book, I must have read it two, three times. I didn't understand most of it until halfway through the year, but I read it, I could read it with fluency. I was basically teaching myself to read. So, I've done well in school, I wasn't kept back again, but that idea of having to always, um, prove myself has stuck with me.

Uh, as, even an- an- an adult, and when now in my work with children, I make a policy that, uh, one, I remind my teachers there's no research to, um, retain children, and whatever reasons they have I discourage it. And it's related to this experience. Because I knew I would have been devastated if my mother didn't speak English and could advocate for me. And my mother made the proposal (pause) that if she doesn't do well, but give her a chance. So -- it-it would have stigmatized me and I know now that children, that's awful what we do. So I have a particular little niche in my work, working with children, that I do everything I can, that -- and I overrule teachers in most cases if they want to retain students.

Levine: Why don't you say for the tape what your work is?

Serpa: My work – (clears throat) - is the English language director for the Malden [ph] public schools, and it's a program that assesses children, places them, and provides programs for English language learners. And I have, uh, kindergarten through twelfth grade and my program has 640 children. So...

Levine: Oh, great. And you love it? You love doing it? [interposed]

Serpa: I love it. I love that. [interposed]

Levine: That's wonderful.

Serpa: Yeah.

Levine: So did your mother help you to learn English?

Serpa: I don't have a conscious memory of my mother doing that. Um, I remembered being home and at home we always spoke in Portuguese until our middle school years. Then it became English amongst, each, ourselves, except with my dad and my mom. And then I remembered, like, middle school, actually transferring and speaking in English when I get home with my mom, except if my father was present.

My mother never sat down, I cannot remember, with any of us, ever sitting down to work with us or help us with homework. I think she knew that whatever we had to do, we had to do it – do it ourselves, and learn it, learn it well. And I think that by -- as a mom -- and, you know, um, we did fine, 'cause we had- we had normally developing brains. And we were high achievers and motive- we were highly motivated kids.

Levine: How come you were so motivated. do you think?

Serpa: We- We all of us, but me in particular, loved school. I would rather be in school than be at home. Uh, I dreaded summer vacations, I dreaded winter vacations. Because we were home, we didn't do anything, and it's a similar experience, my students today. They cry when they go on vacation. They do not want to leave school. Because school is interesting, engaging, they make friends, and- and they have a real life. When they leave school, they're in a small apartment, like we were in this case, we were here, uh, it was at home.

And my mother, although w- we did the housework and did the, uh, [not understood], we would watch tv. In my middle school years, she would make Helen and me do crochet, like, all afternoon, after we did our chores. Well, when you're twelve and thirteen you don't want to do that. So I k- I think cleverly decided – I knew my mother always liked to go to the library, so, um, I said, "Mummy, I -- I want to go to the library to get some books."

So I would do that at least once a week, all summer long I would do to the library, and I loved the smell of the library. And I started just getting books, and exploring books, and I read books. Today the required reading in high school and, and middle school, only through like, *The Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Sparticus*, all of Pearl S. Buck's books I read in the seventh or eighth grade. And I read them because, not because I wanted to read. My mother didn't nag me. She would leave me alone on the porch or on the sofa if I was reading. So I learned, the thicker the book, the less my mother made me do things. S-

But it had a good outcome. I became an avid reader. And my mother- uh, I know enjoyed taking a look and seeing that we were reading because my mother loved to read. So she never minded how long we took when we went to the library. Uh, we always brought back several books and she was fine. I'd say, "I'm going upstairs to read" – 'cause we lived upstairs, and on the third floor – she would leave us alone if we said we were doing our homework. Um, we were left to be quiet and just do our homework. So she respected that quiet learning time. Uh, but it was really a way for us – for me – not to do much housework. I did only what I had to do, because I was gonna read.

Levine: And you didn't have to crochet.

Serpa: No. Uh, I mean, I've learned it, but my mother wasn't a good teacher. She could do all of this. She was a master. But there's a difference and she would say, "It's one thing doing it and one thing knowing how to teach it." She didn't really have the patience to teach Helen and me. She would – we – she would show it, we would do it, and do it. Then she would look and, "No, that's wrong."

She'd rip -- in thirty seconds, she'd rip everything out that took you an hour to do. And then I would be heartbroken. 'cause then you'd have to work and work and work some more. So, uh, it wasn't 'til later that I actually appreciated and actually did hem work, because that memory of being- just, your whole work for the whole afternoon in thirty seconds my mother ripped everything out.

I did learn to sew. My mother taught me to sew. I made clothes, I made my clothes for school. And upstairs, we would do the, um, the-the- not

the power machines, but the hand, um, hand pedal machines. It was like fun. I liked the sound of them, I liked when my mother was using them, you know? The rhythm she had. So she taught me how to cut the patterns and baste and actually sew.

So I was a young w- adult, and all through high school I made my clothes. And my mother gave me a lot of autonomy to do it. She basically just showed me, supervised me. She would, you know, tuck and fit. And so she did that with Helen and I.

Levine: It sounds like you and Helen... were sort of... had a bond? [interposed]

Serpa: We're close in age, yes. [interposed]

Levine: And then Clara and Andrea... right?

Serpa: That's right, they're younger. [interposed] And then Teresa's five years older, so she had -- she was more developed and interested in boys and wanted to go out and... [not understood] a little bit more rebellious. I wasn't at that stage. I was contented doing those things. You know, ah, it was interesting because most girls did not know how to sew. And I- [not understand] I helped make the skirt -- in those days you made skirts and jumpers and all of that. And we'd pick out all the patterns and the fabrics. So, that's what my mother did with us.

Levine: Can you think of any of your mother's sayings or attitudes about life or living that she tried to pass on? Did she have any?

Serpa: She did. Hers was the serenity prayer. Um, and actually Helen, uh, has received that. Um, my mother crocheted it among her many things. And, um, that's what she would often say to us in her own way. Because she said, "This is life, and you have to look at what are things that you can change, and if they're good for you then change them, but if they're not you have to accept them and then to move on." And then, in recent years, she would use words more like, "Margaret, you're worried about it, forget about it now. It will take care of itself. It will take care of itself."

And in recent months, I've had an occasion that I wake up and I- I can hear my mother saying that. "Margaret, just forget about it, it will take care of itself." And there's great comfort in that, 'cause you would sit here and just use those words, "just forget about it, it will take care of itself." So she was not a woman of a lot of words. She was a great listener. She didn't freely offer opinion. And she was very confidential. Um, uh, she wasn't a chatterbox.

Um, you know, someti- and, uh, and, uh, were- sometimes you'd say, "I wonder if she's really paying attention." You know? Uh, and in- in recent years, and sometimes I would say, "Mummy, you're reading the whole paper." And she would read, and read, and read. And I said, "She's can't be reading the whole paper. She's reading, okay, obituaries and she's reading the want ads."

And I'd say, um, is sometimes she'd ask me a question about something from a want ad. "Margaret, what is that?" Like a certain kind of job or skill.

And I would tell her. I said, "Where did you get that?" "Oh, they're looking for somebody to do this, and I don't know what it is that, that it is." So my mother would read all the want ads. And then when she'd read the funnies. At one point I said, "Ma, do you really read the funnies?"

She said, "Yes. I read every one of them." I say, "I never see you laughing." And she said very seriously, "I don't think they're funny." (pause) Well, there you go. But I realize, I never read the funnies either.

LEVINE: You don't think they're funny either?

SERPA: Uh... I can't be bothered with it, is more that. She read them. Uh, I-I just, I'm very select when I read. And she would notice 'cause I've been in and out of here for many years. On Sundays when we'd be doing the paper 'cause she'd be having with my dad, or after he passed just her and me having coffee. And we would spread out the paper. Then she would say, "Here, Margaret, here's your part." She knows I always was looking for the housing part, for the business part.

And until she pointed out to me, I wasn't even aware, consciously, that I was like, filtering through the paper, and then grabbing those. [not

understood] I know that's what you always want to read first. And it wasn't the front page and all of that. So she took notice of everything in detail. She didn't comment on it, it just- she noticed. It was just part of w- who she was.

LEVINE: Do you feel you're like your mother in some ways?

SERPA: No. In s-some ways, yes, but not in most ways. Andrea, Mary, Helen, and a little bit of Aurelia, they're more like my mother.

LEVINE: In the sense of...

SERPA: Um, they're more private. They listen more. They don't offer chatter, they listen and then usually if asked, they'll-you'll get an opinion from them. Or, "So what do you think, Andrea?" You know? They all are very much more like our mother. My father would give opinions about everything. And then said, "But you do what you want." And then he'd be fine. You know, he felt like he did his advice. You know, "I did my part, and"-but then you do what you want.

My mother would never talk like this, she would just listen and usually didn't comment. And she had big eyes and you'd look at her and you'd say, "Ma, what do you think?" And she would just quietly wait, and you'd have to ask her again if you wanted a comment. That's how my mom works.

LEVINE: And how about your father? Did he try to pass along some words of guidance or wisdom for, for how you live?

SERPA: Well, there's one in particular that I had not remembered until this past week when my uncle, his youngest brother, my uncle John, said to me, "Margaret," we were talking about our- my children and his grandchildren. And he said, "There's something your father always said." And I asked, "What was that?" 'cause my father was very humorous, funny, and had a lot of a-a unique sense of humor, like his brothers. They were very funny men.

And, um, he said, "Your father would say about your children," uh, 'cause I have two boys and a daughter, "for a man to grow up straight-" no, "for a man in Portu-" this is in Portuguese. Um, "for a man to be straight, to have a straight life and be a straight man, has to grow like a grapevine which is crooked." Now, my father, I know, didn't mean crooked, but he would say, "of all of the curves nec-necessary to develop to be a straight," and in Portuguese it's very nice. Uh, [speaks the phrase in Portuguese]

And my father, although that's not uncommon, my father's one of the few people I've ever heard say that and would say that frequently. It's interesting that his youngest brother, you know, who had very little contact with him remembers that. Even as a young man, my father would say that. 'cause my father, from what, you know, people that know him- got married very young. His older brothers got married when they were in their forties.

My father got married, he was the first one, in his twenties. So he was always seen by them as a man of high respect who honored his wife. Um, who was hard working, all of those and didn't drink. Didn't run around with women, which is very different from a lot of other people, you know? So they will say, "Your m- father was a man of respect." So when they say that, it's like as a role model, not only as a- a husband, but as a man. He was very respected. I- And as a dad, I see him that way too. And that's his great legacy to us.

And he would say, you know, love only to my mother here, "Mary, um, you look better than when you were thirty-five years old." And she would say, "Oh, [not understood] there you go again." [not understood] "Mary, we're older now, we're at the end of our lives. Isn't there something you want to tell me? Something you haven't s- told me?" She said, "Andre, we're married over seventy years, there's nothing that I haven't told you." He said, "There must be something. I'm always full of things to say." She said, "You talk too much. There's nothing I have to say to you."  
(laughs)

You know. So, y- he would be always talking and engaging. My mother would just say, "Andre. [ph]" But he loved her dearly, and vice versa, you know? And- um, and he would always say, "What we have today- their home and their resources- I would have nothing if your mother didn't take care of the home, the children, and take care of everything. 'cause I never knew what anything cost. Your mother take care of everything, and she's the one that made things happen."

Which was true, my mother made everything in the home. She was very economical, she was thrifty, um, she wasn't lavish in any- on herself ever, on her children, appropriately when we're older, not when we're younger. We had everything we needed, um, and nothing we craved for. Because there were so many of us. She made sure that she provided and provided well for all of us. So they lived a very, uh, good life, very honorable life. And um, they were loved by all of us and deeply respected by each of us individually and as children."

LEVINE: And how about you father? Do you think he found his American dream here?

SERPA: In recent years, yes, absolutely. When we were growing up, s- very often, he would say- if we cried, we want to go somewhere, she'd would say, "Go ask your father." 'cause she wouldn't say no. Then he would said, "Go ask your mother." We said, "Um, Mummy said to ask you." And of course, he wasn't gonna say yes. So we're caught in this, you know, but my father sometimes would say, um, he would see it as problems if we wanted to go out and go to a dance, you know, at high school. And we'd cry, you know, "I don't see why I can't go."

My friends were always so received here, all of our friends were. My parents provide a very welcoming, warm environment. They loved having all of our friends here all the time. Whether it was to eat, play cards on Saturdays, whatever. My friends, including my brothers' and sisters', th- we all have warm memories of our childhood when our childhood friends were here. But my parents would not- never let us go anywhere. So, you know.

So when you had friends and they wanted you to come over for the afternoon. They'd said, "But your mother and father are so nice, they like me." And that was true, but they didn't want us out. So, um. My father's, when he'd get upset, he would say, "I want to go back. I'm gonna go back. Never mind bringing up here. I'm sacrificing a lot, I came for all of you, you're all unhappy or you're crying." So as a young person, I remember him saying that. I wouldn't say a lot, but when he'd be upset and frustrated. Until my aunts and uncles came. Until my aunts and uncles came. Because we were by ourselves.

I started to kind of dislike thinking about the Azores. Saying, you know, "Why would he want to go back to a place that didn't provide for us at all?" But in later years, he never talked like that. He would talk about it warmly, and tell all the stories growing up, and he really never talked about a longing to return. That ended with his fiftieth visit when we were all there. He knew that this is it, this is his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. And he- he loved being here in this home. People came by all the time and he knew everybody.

So he found his place here. He made friends with everybody. Even people- when my father died, we had the whole neighborhood here. I didn't know any of these people here. They said, "No, we knew Mr. Serpa, I would see him, he would stop and talk to me all the time." So my father, had he, uh, spoken better English earlier, w- could have run for office in the city, because he- he- people a- were attracted to him as a person. He was very warm and funny. He was sincere.

And he knew that- we lived with a lot of people in our house, for short term and long term. People that needed home, transition between a job, we had people here living with us off and on for years. So my parents provided that for us as well. We kind of internalized that in different ways in our own lives. And it's to my parents' credit-

LEVINE: You mean extending yourself to other people?

SERPA: Yes, all the time. Yeah. Sometimes I go home, I say, "What do you mean, this man is coming from California for a month? Where are we gonna put him?" "Oh, what do you mean where are we gonna put him? He's gonna have the whole back room." Okay... and somehow we never talked about- at that time, we only had one bathroom. We now have two, but, it's just... that's what you have to do. We had another family that was here a year and a half, a mother and two kids. So this was common. Um, we- it- it was a- around the table, they were part of our extended family. And none of them were related, they were just people in need that knew friends or family members, and- uh, so it was kind of a stop-off place.

LEVINE: Well, I have the sense that both your mother and father never wanted to become American, that they wanted to retain their um, their ways and their- their identity with the Azores.

SERPA: Well, yes, because my mother grew up in Fall River, but her home life was very small, traditional-like. So she had been born in- in Little Maia, uh, was very sheltered. And even as a young woman, she went back

and continued to be the same way. It was safe and familiar. More than wanting to [not understood], because my parents, when we- they didn't know all the ills going on around. There were gangs all out here, across the street. We never told my mother and father that. They never knew that-

LEVINE: There were what?

SERPA: Gangs. Gangs of kids. [not understood] Summerville was not a nice place to grow up kids. It was- but- w- none of us were ever involved in anything. We- we somehow were good students. Our- our friends were the similar group. We just never got involved, you know? And there was s- we were involved in drinking, which was the drug of choice then, it wasn't other things. But, um, there was those attractions all over the place, but somehow- I- I think the fear of life or god, about my mother's looking at us if we got into trouble. Um, that's what it was, that's what kept us out of trouble.

Because it was there. But, uh, we really didn't, um, get pulled into that. None of us. We were good students overall. Um, and- and I go to school, my teachers would say, "I had Herb last year, and then I had your sister Teresa five years ago." [not understood] Their teachers would always tell you, "They were the best students." I found out later they were not, but [not understood], "Oh my god..." You know? So that the fear of life, you've got older brothers and sisters that the teachers all knew, um, that helped keep you in line, too, growing up, because, uh, s- it's a pretty busy city.

LEVINE: It sounds like you had to prove yourself in that way all the time.  
[interposed]

SERPA: Yes, all the time. [interposed] Then I found out that I actually did better than most of them, but that was years after I was out of high school. I said, "I worked so hard and he actually got a D." You know? And my mother said, "Well you know Herb, he's [not understood], he had that teacher." My mother never disclosed those kinds of things that were not so positive. But w- you know, we had a life my parents- it's not that they didn't want to be American, they were here, they were neighborly, they lived a quiet life. It- it- there wasn't a choice. You know?

There was a choice to go back, my mother, that wasn't going to be in hers. My father was more of- frustration and, um... as my older sister got married, Mary, and then Orela, and there were less of us at home, for him he wasn't as happy 'cause he wanted everybody around all the time. Even on his deathbed, he told my sister Aurelia, "You sit right there, you tell your husband you don't need to go back to New Hampshire. I want everybody around here. Where is Herb?" I said, "Dad, he's working."

"Never mind work! I'm dying! I want everybody around here." This went on for three years. You know, everything he [not understood], "I want everybody here. I'm your father." You know? My mother would say, "Noe, Margaret, don't take time off from work, I'm gonna be fine. I'm fine." My mother was the opposite. You have to do your work. My father wanted everybody around him. He wa- He was always at the center of attention. So they're very different, each in their own way.

LEVINE: So what did you do? You went through school here in Summerville.

SERPA: Yes.

LEVINE: And then what?

SERPA: When I graduated from high school, I didn't get into college. It was during the Vietnam War. And I was rejected from the only school that I applied, U Mass Boston. I couldn't get in because of my SAT scores. So I was devastated. So my mom said to me, "Well, all these years, I've been telling you should take the business course like Teresa and go to work in business." 'cause my sister Teresa was very good in the business course. And you could go on and do very well in those days. But I didn't want to be like Teresa, and anyway... So I always the bus- the college courses to go to college. So I decided, well, if I didn't get in, then I'm going to have to be better at business than my girlfriends who had business courses.

So that year, 1964, I remember going to Burdette College [ph] in Boston. I didn't know shorthand. I could type – I taught myself to type when I was young. I decided, if I'm gonna get a job as a secretary, I had to be very good. 'Cause all my frie- several friends were, you know, at competitive jobs. So that six week course, I took shorthand. I have Lyndon B. Johnson's, uh, speeches in 1964 in shorthand. That's what I practice taking it. And at the end of my six, seven weeks of courses at Burdette College [ph], I received a job offer and I worked there for five years as a secretary.

As a secretary, I worked- from a junior secretary to an executive secretary, uh, to the president's son. And, uh, I did really well, and made more than my dad was. But I continuously was taking courses. I was not happy doing the work. I- I was good at it, but part of me was not fulfilled. And, um, I was struggling because my other friends got into school and were through. And I desperately wanted to go to college.

So I took courses at Harvard, Northeastern, Boston University, the community college. I was taking courses everywhere, and I said, how is it that I'm doing so well and I couldn't get in? But I never talked about it with anybody. It was a lone life, in those years, I didn't know you go to counselors and all. And finally, I sa- I had enough college credits for two years.

And then I went and applied to the same school that rejected me five years earlier and spoke with the man who rejected me. I said, I've done all this work, and I showed him all my transcripts and "you rejected me five years ago. I really want to go to school now." So he offered me additional courses based on work that I had done, and then I went on full-time. I said, "No, I'm going to do this full-time." So I finished my undergraduate years in less than two years. I did six courses every semester, summer courses to finish. And, uh, then I got my job in Cambridge public schools, and-

LEVINE: You were studying education?

SERPA: No, I didn't want to do edu- I was so disappointed in being rejected from school. I said to my guidance counselor, Mr. Heally, "One day when I go to school, I'm gonna be a coun -- guidance counselor so that other kids don't get messed up like you did to me. You didn't offer me any options, how to do it." I mean, I did this all on my own, right? And I did, actually -- I majored in sociology and psychology, not education, because I said I would never go into education. I mean, they're- they're not that smart, and you know, I was kind of fresh to myself.

So when I finished as an undergraduate, I had an opportunity to work at the Boston public schools. So they want to know when I'm getting certified. I said, "I don't want to be certified. I don't want to be a teacher." "Oh, no, we think you'd be a great guidance counselor." I said, "Well, then, give me the job, and I'll get certified." And they did. So I went on to get a master's in, uh, counseling, and that's- but they hired me before I was certified. And, you know, I did that for a number of years, until, actually, I had my first child.

So I went a non-traditional route, because usually you had to go to education and be a teacher, um, I said, "I will not do that because I do not feel that's the way to go." I needed to have different experiences than to be able to do this. Um, so I did, and I've been fine. You know.

LEVINE: Now, how did you meet your husband?

SERPA: My sister Helen, who lived right down the street here, her husband at the time had a radio station as a hobby. Brazilian news, or something. And

he had met Bob somehow. I don't know how they actually met. And Bob had arrived from Brazil; he was a Greek who had immigrated as a young boy, like we had come here, to Brazil with his parents and then as a young man, he was 28, he came here to get reunited with his mother and father. E -- Helen kept saying to me she wanted me to- introduce me to Bob. And Bob is so wonderful, he's handsome, and he's this and that. I said, "If he was that good, he would have been taken." She said, "Well, he is with Anna, but that's not his real girlfriend, he's not interested in her." And I said, "Helen, I don't want to, you know, get involved with him."

But it was mainly because- it was the connection between her husband and Bob and I didn't care that much for her husband. So anything to do with Victor, I said, "Can't be good." So one day, she came on a Sunday afternoon, [not understood], and h-he comes in here, and I see this great-looking guy with this- tall, you know, he was tall, handsome, he had a beard at the time, it was popular- and I said, "Oh my god, this is the guy she wants me to meet." And I thought, quite good-looking, but I was kind of nice-looking too, but I said, "No, anything with Victor, I'm not going to have anything to do with him."

Then he said, "Do you want to go out with Helen and Dave- with Helen and Victor?" I said, "No, I'm busy." And I was sitting like you. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm doing something," whatever it was. He said, "Why don't you come and join us? You don't have to, you know." I said, "No, I don't want to do that." And he said something in Portuguese that was kind of, you know, kind of a dull person are you, you have a chance to go out-

LEVINE: He could speak Portuguese?

SERPA: Yes, 'cause he grew up in Brazil-

LEVINE: Brazil.

SERPA: You know? So then I said, "No, I will go." I put everything away and off I went, had dinner with them, and I was with him ever since.

LEVINE: Okay. And his name is Bob...

SERPA: Bob Kyriakakis.

LEVINE: You want to spell it?

SERPA: K-Y-R-I-A-K-A-K-I-S.

LEVINE: Okay. And you have three-

SERPA: Three children.

LEVINE: Three children. Why don't you say their names?

SERPA: Yeah, our -- started with our oldest son is Nicholas, second is Phillip, and Alexander is our third child. Both Nicholas and Alexander are named after their paternal grandparents, and Phillip is named after his cousin in England. Very nice children.

LEVINE: Do you think coming here as a six-year old impacted your personality in some way? I mean, the fact that you started out somewhere else and came to a strange place and started again...

SERPA: I came young enough that I don't have those- I have them through hearing other people's experiences, and I'm hopefully empathetic and sensitive. But I don't recall that personally impacted me. I came very young. I think with my older sisters it was different, they came at 15 and 16, but I came young enough that culturally a normal kid in classes and had friends and spoke English quite proficiently young that I didn't personally experience those normal traumas that one would if you're a little bit older.

LEVINE: How about growing up in an immigrant family? Did that have any influence on the way you are?

SERPA: Well, in this family, yes. Not immigrant on a large scale, but in my mother and dad's family, because we grew up at the time so isolated and didn't have extended families. The normal things of growing up – going

to dances, dating, and high school – I didn't understand what my mother was so upset about all the time. Teresa would want to go out to a dance or something, and I knew she would meet boys at the dances because when I would go- but it was a struggle to let us go to dancing. And then when I was old enough in high school, my girlfriends were all dating. Some had steady boyfriends, others just dated occasionally.

When I was asked to go out – oh, my goodness. Unless I really, really liked somebody, to ask my mother to go out, it wasn't worth the battle. I remembered going out in my junior year- this young man Charlie Harley calls me and invited me to go for pizza with some kids on a Friday night, 'cause nobody drove, so everybody's still walking. And, um, I desperately wanted to go, and I said yes, and then he hung up. Then I said, [not understood] "How is it that I'm going to ask my mother to go?"

So I decided I would iron all week. Well, to iron all week for all these clothes when you didn't have a drier was a lot of clothes. So I ironed every day a couple of hours, ironing, ironing, thinking that my mother would notice that I was doing a lot of ironing. 'Course, she never noticed or acknowledged things we did. And then I said to her, "Mommy, this boy at school, asked me to go. We're just going bowling" – and she knew where, I told her – "and then we'll go for pizza, then he's gonna bring me home, and we'll be here by 9:30."

She said, "You want to go out with a boy? Go out of the hou-" I said, "Yes." Oh, she fought and screamed and yelled at me, called names, but then I just thought, I want to go. I said, "Mummy, he's gonna come here, pick me up, and then we're gonna walk." She knew the other girl, I

mean, she knew the kids we were going with. "And then he's gonna- I'll be home by 9:30." That even when you went out a little bit occasionally, and that was only occasionally, it was so hard to go out that i- it- you couldn't show you had a good time, 'cause then she'd even be madder. She'd have a mad face.

Or the next day, she never said, "Did you have a nice time?" You couldn't say yes. We never talked about it. So those things were not normal, and that impacted me. So outside of- in school and all, I was very extroverted, I was involved in school clubs, I was a cheerleader, but- um, and Helen too. We would go dressed up as cheerleaders even on days when we didn't cheer, 'cause we knew if you weren't cheering my mother wouldn't let us go. But if we were cheering, we had a duty, so it was okay. So we get in the bathroom, take our cheering clothes off, and then, you know...

LEVINE: But she let you cheer?

SERPA: Yes.

LEVINE: She let you be cheerleaders?

SERPA: Well, because Herbie, played soccer- uh, not soccer, football. So she was familiar with the games and the cheerleaders. So when I was old enough to compete in high school, I knew that if I didn't make the cheering team, my mother wasn't gonna let me go to games. So it was

like life/death situation. I practice [not understood], and I would like to think I got in because I was good, but it was only because Herbie was a senior on the team, and I was his little sister. Because there were a lot of girls as good or better than I was. [not understood] "Please dear God, let me make that team." Team of 24. But didn't matter. My mother never saw Helen or I cheer. All the years. And Helen [not understood] the following year was behind me. And then- never took the time to go watch us cheer. Because the things the girls did- I don't think that important to her. She didn't value those.

LEVINE: Did she go see Herbie play football?

SERPA: Oh, yes. And Louis. The boys.

LEVINE: So the boys were treated differently?

SERPA: Yes, very differently. My father went to all the games. My mother didn't go to all their games, but she went to a number of their games. But – then -- you know. Helen and I were cheerleaders from ninth grade on. It's a lot of years that we trained. So I was determined I was gonna make the team.

LEVINE: How about dating with your brothers? Were they as strict with them?

SERPA: Well, Herb in high school, he actually started dating Evelyn who was my age. She was a sophomore like I was, and a cheerleader. And that's

how he met her. So in those years, he had another girlfriend, she would come here, and they liked her. It was okay for him. It was not okay for the girls. And Louis also had Marcia. They were dating from the ninth grade all through college. She was like a younger sister we had, we all loved her. She was here all the time. But for the girls to go and have boyfriends, it was not- it was seen as you weren't a nice girl if you had a boyfriend or broke up with and had another boyfriend.

Even later in life it was the same thing. So it was not, you know- that negatively impacted, and- and didn't allow us normally to develop as normal young women. And none of us really had the strength, emotion, to say, "Well, I'm just going." Teresa did, but none of us- I couldn't- I saw the turmoil that Teresa's independence caused Helen and the rest of us at home. 'Cause my mother and father be yelling all the time while Teresa's out have a good time at a dance, you know?

LEVINE: Teresa was older?

SERPA: Five years older.

LEVINE: Older than you?

SERPA: Yeah. So while she's in high school going to normal high school parties or dances and come home late, my parents would be yelling from the time she left until she got home. So Helen and Louis and I would go upstairs and go to bed on Saturdays. It was all, "Oh, please, there they

go again.” So I thought, “When I grow up, I’m never gonna lie to my mother, I’m gonna bring the boys home – because Ter -- Teresa would bring them home, she would just meet them at the dance or something – that must be the problem, that my mother doesn’t know who they are.

So I- I made like a pact to try getting my mother to say, “I will always bring them home, you will always know who they are.” But as a kid what I’m navigating through. And- and I always did. And my mother, when I was dating this fellow from Cambridge – somebody Portuguese, I didn’t usually date, but I did – and I said, “I’m going out with Tony Moda.” And I was in my late twenties at the time. And sh -- I said, “He’s picking me up at this time, you know, if you’re gonna be home, fine.”

And then she said, “Margaret, don’t bring any more men home. I only want to meet the last man you bring home.” Then that’s when I realized, you know, she was worried- concerned about, like, my reputation. I mean, I was like, a really nice girl, but that- in her frame of mind, that was not the issue here. That was out of her experience. She didn’t want to meet any more. But every one of them I brought home.

LEVINE: I suspect that maybe your father was the one and only for her?

SERPA: Yes, yes, oh yeah. Yeah. And, uh, so, it was- you know, we couldn’t talk about it, you know, among ourselves, even my oldest sisters were married. Aurelia married somebody from Portugal and- that came here. Mary was married to Frannie, who was always here when we were younger. So th – there -- we didn’t know other families. I didn’t know

anybody else my age with that experience. My girlfriends would say, "Your mother and father are so nice! Why don't they let you go to a dance?" And I said, "They are nice, just made about something."

I kind of cover up because I couldn't understand it. 'Cause they couldn't un -- my -- my best friend Marcia, she said to me -- she was the only one at home, "Margaret, you want to come? My mother wants me to be really good when I'm fifteen, sixteen. And she wants me to learn to dance." And I said, "Oh, I can't," and I always thought the issue was money. I said, "I don't -- I can't ask my mother and father for money. I didn't know what it was at the time, but I certainly wasn't going to ask them for dance lessons in seventh and eighth grade to become more gracious so you could attract a boy, which is what her mother told her.

And she said, "I told my mother I would go if my mother offered to pay for you. So you can tell your mother that my mother will pick us up. You know, 'cause her mother drove and everything. Then when I told my mother, "Ma, Marcia's mother" -- and she knew her ---"said she would pay for me." Because Marcia was like an only child, she had a much older brother. And she said, "No. If dancing is good for Marcia's daughter -- for Marcia- her mother would let her go. But learning to dance, she should learn dance on your own. You don't need lessons, it's a waste of money.

So I couldn't go. I couldn't go with Marcia and her mother when they go fruit shopping, and then go out to eat on Friday night. "No, you're not gonna go and have somebody else pay for your hot dog and drink, whatever it was." And I said, "That's exactly why I want to go!" You

know? I was a twelve year old, so she would get a hot dog and ice cream, with your best friend. So stuff like, you know.

LEVINE: I guess that's the old world way, right?

SERPA: Yeah. That that was frivolous and wasteful and unnecessary. Everything that was necessary, essential, we had. But these other things, there was never negotiations, we- we couldn't do that. So it was a little bit -- it was lonely.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. What are you proud of? What have you done in your lifetime that you feel you have- has given you a lot of satisfaction?

SERPA: Well, in the years that I was, um -- my early twenties -- without -- with -- with very little really academic preparation, I'm most proud of the work I did for the Cambridge hospital. Community service work, the department of pediatrics, and then helping develop a well baby clinic. I had no medical training, I just knew how to recruit people in need. And working with my mother over those years too was she provided the support and at home for that.

We would community meetings in my home around working to develop a center which is now a statewide organization to develop a center to provide services for immigrants. Um, and although the group then was Portuguese speakers, still is Portuguese speakers, but now they're

Brazilians, the new wave of immigrants. So th -- that's really -- and that was work I did really as a volunteer. It wasn't my paid work.

LEVINE: This was the well baby clinic for immigrants?

SERPA: Yeah. And it was a challenge that a couple friends of mine did for me. Because we were trying to get the Cambridge hospital the welfare to employ people who spoke Portuguese as our part of our kind of radical work. We were all in our twenties, and we didn't know any of this stuff. And the -- the mayor said -- and Dr. Porter said that, "If there is somebody who speaks Portuguese and is qualified, he will hire them.

So my girlfriends called me up and said, "Margaret, you make a good presentation. You're gonna go up there and you're gonna be our applicant." I said, "I can't do that, you know? I'm working, I had a job working for Mr. Steinerd [ph]. I can" -- They said, "You have to, because we're gonna prove that they really don't want to include these. I went for the job, and Dr. Porter was so sweet, and he described what he wanted. He described a couple families that had polio. This was unseen in any area hospitals. It was two cases of polio, and I was like, I couldn't believe it.

I said, "In the Portuguese community?" He said, "Yes, and I need somebody that can help get these families here." Then I thought- "Well you need a nurse, you need a doctor." He said, "No. We- They won't come for the nurses and doctors. We need somebody else that they can understand." And I thought, "Well, is this a real job?" He said, "Yes." I

said, "Oh. There really is a job." He said, "Yes." He said, "Y- you want the job?" I said, "No, I have a job." He said, "Can we convince you to take the job?" I thought, "Oh my god, here I'm sitting" -- and then eventually I did end up taking it.

I quit my nice job. And my father said, "You're a greater job that's paying almost double what I'm making. A beautiful office job as an executive secretary." I said, "Daddy, but I think this is going to be the job I love." And I did. And I -- at that time, shortly thereafter, I applied for the Peace Corp. This -- not Peace Corp, but what do you call it? American Vista Corp, I think it was. And in two years, naturally I forgot about it. And then one day I received a call and that was at the Harrington school clinic one afternoon. They were calling me from DC to finalize my application.

They offered me a placement in Kansas City. And I said, "Oh, no, just place me here where I am and I will do it." You know? Because it was a lot I did. We did, um the first Portuguese program for a PBS channel in Boston. We did three of those. And then I formed a dance group. I didn't even know how to dance these dances, but I'd get kids off the street. And you know, I felt very energized and fulfilled as a young person. Until years later I went- there was an opening at the Cambridge hospital that- where I started -- as a social worker, and I thought, "Well, I- I'm perfect for that."

Except I didn't have my degree. But it didn't occur to me. I was qualified, and I went and applied, and they turned me down. And they said, "You need a degree." And I said, "But my friend has a degree in French." Who got the job. Liz, and I know her very well. They said, "But

she has a degree. That's a requirement." And I said, "Okay. Dr. Porter, I'm leaving immediately." And this is before I just -- just immediately formulated a plan. I'm going back to school, but you won't see me here anymore in the hospital. I now have a different career. And that's when I went to school around the clock.

And I went on and said, "Now I need to do this for myself, to prepare myself academically. But those years were the most rewarding, personally fulfilling years. Even today. Were those five years or so. Uh, that the times, too, leant itself to a lot of activity. That I've drawn on from people that I've known -- I have friendships from still that era. And -- and, you know, it was just a wonderful time to be a young person.

And I had my mother's support. She was very proud of me. She helped me do a lot of things, quietly making calls. She did things. She was very quiet about it. We would have community meetings here in the house all the time. We got a- a bilingual passage bill in Cambridge, the first bilingual program in the public schools was here in Cambridge, because of- not just me, but about five of us. [not understood]

So a lot can be done in the [not understood] - the conditions of young people have to be there. That- it's not that you think you can do it, it's just that you're naïve enough that you don't know that you don't have all of the preparation to do most of the things. (both laugh) That when faced with it, you can make it happen, if given sort of openings and people around you who have [not understood] -- like Dr. Porter, chief of pediatrics. He says- I said, "I have no medical training, I've never even done a crit [ph]." I -- He said, "We can train you in all of that." So he saw

something in me that- and- I was very fortunate because I didn't see that in myself but I took a leap and it was a great, rewarding experiences for years.

LEVINE: Well, we've certainly gone over an hour. Would you like to say anything relevant to coming here or your life after you came or what you plan for your future?

SERPA: Well, it's not what a -- a -- today I spoke to a group of kids at my school, and I asked them to think about not only about Martin Luther King -- they're learning him and about Obama- and I asked them to write a letter of encouragement and some kind words that they like to submit on Friday before he becomes president. And words of -- and I taught them the words 'cause they don't know 'cause I just -- he's doing a pledge, going to make a vow to protect us, he's gonna take an oath of office. So there were these new words for him- for the children. And then I said, because you want him to be just -- you want him to be fair and so I taught those words.

And I said, "So using the words that you know, and others you don't know, write a three sentence note what you want for him and what you wish for yourself as a young person." Then I said, "And I will type all those, and we will send it to Obama and he will get it before his inauguration." So like that, I said to them, "I'm older, I have children, grandch- I don't have grandchildren, but my children are much older. That my wish for you is that you have a good, safe, peaceful life. But you have to prepare yourself for it -- what it is."

So those are words of encouragement and work for peace. Because in that class, the whole world is represented there. They can be friends in the class, learning from people like me, certainly there's hope in the world. So that's -- that's what I think I try to convey to them. That they too could have an impact by learning, doing their work, then I said, "I have to go do my other work," and then I left. (both laugh)

So it would be just that all these experience that the United States has been for people. Historically it's still the new nation, relatively to many countries of the world, that we have to demonstrate greater tolerance, forgiveness, and have engagement of civic life so that there can be more peace here and elsewhere. And I'm determined -- you know, I don't have young children, I should be able to dele -- delegate at least two days a week after my work that I can do something of service to others that is different from what I'm doing day-to-day. And hopefully we can get over these not-so-good times.

LEVINE: That's a beautiful place to end. Thank you, Margaret.

SERPA: Thank you so much.

LEVINE: I'm speaking with Margaret Serpa, and this is Janet Levine for the Statue of Liberty Ellis Island signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW