

**Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project, MC 356**  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Institute Archives and Special Collections

**Brit d'Arbeloff** – class of 1961

Interviewed by Jean Choi, class of 2006

August 23, 2013

## **Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project**

Interview with Brit d'Arbeloff (S.M., Mechanical Engineering, 1961) by MIT graduate Jean Choi (S.B. Literature, 2007) on August 23, 2013.

This interview was conducted at the home of Brit d'Arbeloff in Brookline, Massachusetts. At the time of the interview, d'Arbeloff was a Life Member Emeritus of the MIT Corporation and an *honorary member of the Corporation's Development Committee*. In addition, she was a member of MIT's Council for the Arts, the MIT Corporation's Committee on Linguistics and Philosophy, and the Corporation's Committee on Social Sciences. In the interview, she refers to her late husband, Alexander d'Arbeloff (SB, Management, class of 1949), who chaired the MIT Corporation from 1996-2003 and was co-founder of Teradyne, Inc.

CHOI: I'm here with Brit d'Arbeloff, who graduated from MIT in 1961 with her master's, correct?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: Let's start from the beginning, your childhood—where were you born?

D'ARBELOFF: I was born in Chicago, Illinois. We moved to Oak Park when I was six months old.

CHOI: Did you have siblings growing up?

D'ARBELOFF: I had one brother, seven years younger.

CHOI: What did your mother and father do?

D'ARBELOFF: My father was an inventor, an engineer. He designed the first Mixmaster, which is why we have the Mixmasters all over the house.

CHOI: Oh, there's a painting there of a Mixmaster!

D'ARBELOFF: Then there's one of the old ones.

CHOI: Oh, I have to see that. That is so cool!

D'ARBELOFF: Actually, David Kelly, who runs the d.school [Institute of Design] out at Stanford gave me that because he found it at an antique shop.

CHOI: Your father was an inventor; did he grow up in Chicago?

D'ARBELOFF: No, he was born in Sweden. As was my mother.

CHOI: So your family ethnically is Swedish.

D'ARBELOFF: Absolutely, yes.

CHOI: Did you keep in touch with your family in Sweden?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, it was pretty hard because it was during the Second World War, and we went over there. I met my grandparents when I was three years old.

CHOI: For the first time?

D'ARBELOFF: For the first time. That was in 1938. Then the war happened, and we couldn't go anywhere. By the time we were able to get to Sweden again after the war, my grandfather had died. So I saw both my grandmothers.

CHOI: Your mother and father were the only members of their family who left Sweden?

D'ARBELOFF: That's correct. They met in Chicago at the Swedish Engineers Society.

CHOI: Was your mother an engineer?

D'ARBELOFF: No, only guys were engineers, but they had great parties. [LAUGHS] And my mother was over there in Chicago working.

CHOI: What was she working as?

D'ARBELOFF: She was a bookkeeper.

CHOI: Did they come to America for school? Do you know their story?

D'ARBELOFF: My mother came because her parents wouldn't send her to college because she wasn't a man. She was the top of her class in high school. She just went to visit a friend of hers. You know how everybody has some bad companion that they hang out with that every time their parents say, "Oh god, I hope nothing happens." Well, that was the one that she went to live with in Chicago.



CHOI: Would you say because at that time women weren't supposed to go further for education, that your mother was quite independent to leave the country?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: That's amazing. She was by herself going to college in America?

D'ARBELOFF: No, she didn't go to college. She worked, because she couldn't afford to go to college.

CHOI: That's a very brave move.

D'ARBELOFF: Oh yes, or an ill-considered move. Do you think her parents would have let her do that when she was 18?

CHOI: At home did you speak only English?

D'ARBELOFF: If I'm around Swedish for three or four days I pick it up, but my parents only spoke it at home when they wanted to hide something from the children.

CHOI: That's always the case with immigrant families!

D'ARBELOFF: Because all of these immigrants from all over the world they wanted to learn English, and they didn't want to keep up their language.

CHOI: So for your father—he did go to college?

D'ARBELOFF: He was an engineer. He graduated from technical high school, which is a European system. So it's a couple more years of education than it would be if we figured the American system. Then he did some graduate work in Germany, at Charlottenburg.

CHOI: He found his way...

D'ARBELOFF: Then he came over to the United States. In theory, he was supposed to be farming in North Dakota. His father owned a big farm and thought that his son *would go over just for like a junior year abroad or something*. And so he had hooked him up with a farmer in North Dakota that was going to look after him, but my father stopped in Chicago, got a job with Chicago Flexible Shaft, which became Sunbeam Corporation. And he started building the small appliances business.

CHOI: These are fun bends in history. They met and they had you—do you remember as a child if you had interests that used to stick out? Did you like going to school?

D'ARBELOFF: I was pretty good at it.

CHOI: But did you enjoy it?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, I did.

CHOI: Both of your parents encouraged your studies?

D'ARBELOFF: When I told my father I was going to study engineering, he laughed.

CHOI: How old were you when you decided you wanted to study engineering?

D'ARBELOFF: We were all talking about going to college so around high school.

CHOI: At that point you were at the top of your class; was it the norm for women to go to college?

D'ARBELOFF: Oh yes, but usually doing something like English.

CHOI: Did you go to public school?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: What was your neighborhood like?

D'ARBELOFF: It was a really nice neighborhood. It was in the suburbs.

CHOI: Did you just like math and science growing up?

D'ARBELOFF: I liked everything. I like art; I liked everything. I really wanted to study engineering because I wanted to be a designer. In those days, design was separated from anything having to do with engineering. So you had these weird combinations of things because the designer really didn't know any engineering principles.

CHOI: If they were separate, how did you know you wanted to go into engineering?

D'ARBELOFF: Because I needed the engineering background to become a really good designer. And it turns out that nobody did that in those days. It wasn't until David Kelley and the d-lab and all that, much, much later, so when I went to visit Ideal for the first time I said, "That's what I wanted to do." There wasn't anything like that available.

CHOI: How interesting. When you were in high school and you wanted to pursue engineering—this was when you were applying to college? And your father laughed. So how did you feel? Did you still want to go ahead and do it; did you feel a little discouraged?

D'ARBELOFF: No, it was usual.

CHOI: Where did you want to go to college? Do you remember the application process?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, I remember why I picked Stanford. It wasn't a really admirable reason. [LAUGHS] I read an article that said that 50% of the Stanford incoming freshmen males were over six feet tall! [LAUGHS]

CHOI: That's hilarious. What a random article, but it worked!

D'ARBELOFF: Oh, and it was a really good engineering school. My father knew it was a good engineering school. He would rather I had gone to MIT.

CHOI: Did you apply to MIT?

D'ARBELOFF: No.

CHOI: You had no interest.

D'ARBELOFF: Not at all.

CHOI: It was a strong article on the six-foot men.

D'ARBELOFF: It was. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: Do you remember the application process at all?

D'ARBELOFF: It was really easy. I got a scholarship, kind of an honorary scholarship.

CHOI: Did you have any friends or family in California?



D'ARBELOFF: No.

CHOI: So you went all by yourself.

D'ARBELOFF: My parents took me.

CHOI: Do you remember being excited or nervous?

D'ARBELOFF: I was really excited. Nothing like being 2,000 miles from home. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: So you had that independent spirit as well inside. Before you left, were your parents excited for you?

D'ARBELOFF: They didn't really do excited very well. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: Did they not want you to go so far?

D'ARBELOFF: No, that was fine.

CHOI: They encouraged your studies? They wanted you to go to college?

D'ARBELOFF: Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely.

CHOI: Was that unique at the time?

D'ARBELOFF: No, by that time women went to college, but they usually didn't take anything that was math, science-related.

CHOI: Did you feel unique in that sense?

D'ARBELOFF: I was the only girl in my class.

CHOI: In your whole class? How big was your class?

D'ARBELOFF: It was big. It was Stanford. In the whole engineering department there were no other women.

CHOI: What was that experience like? Was it intimidating? Was it nice?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, my freshman advisor said, "Why don't you drop this major now. They all do." It was a graduate student, what did he know. We don't train advisors very well. We still don't.

CHOI: That's a hard thing to imagine in my case. How did you react to that? How did that feel?

D'ARBELOFF: I said that I was going to give it a try.

CHOI: You enrolled for a set amount of courses?

D'ARBELOFF: There was a core, and once they found out I could do the work, they were very welcoming.

CHOI: Did you find your courses hard?

D'ARBELOFF: I'm pretty obsessive. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: In a good way, I'm assuming. A hard worker. So you did well in your courses.

D'ARBELOFF: Actually, I graduated at the top of my engineering class.

CHOI: That's so amazing. Did it feel like the spotlight was on you?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, the problem was that there wasn't anybody to study with.

CHOI: You didn't have study groups with the men?

D'ARBELOFF: No! They locked us up at 10:30pm. When I finally came to MIT, I had an apartment, so there wasn't any of that stuff.

CHOI: Community-wise, what was a day like for you at school? Where did you live?

D'ARBELOFF: I lived in what used to be sorority houses. At first I lived in the big freshman dorm and then the sophomore dorm.

CHOI: Were they only for women?

D'ARBELOFF: They were only for women.

CHOI: You had a curfew and everything.



D'ARBELOFF: Oh, you bet.

CHOI: Did you have a social life?

D'ARBELOFF: Sure.

CHOI: What did you do for fun?

D'ARBELOFF: We did whatever people do in college for fun. It was a lot of parties.

CHOI: So you had time for partying.

D'ARBELOFF: Yes. It wasn't just nose to the grindstone. Stanford was really funny. It was a dry campus. So there was no alcohol allowed, so what happened was, people would go up in the mountains to all these taverns and things, drink and then go down the rolling mountain road back to get the girls in the dorm by the time the curfew came.

CHOI: How far up are the mountains?

D'ARBELOFF: It's the Santa Cruz mountains, so they are little tiny old mountains, but you couldn't have picked a system that was creepier, scarier. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: Go up to the mountains, drink and come back in time. What an experience! Did you find that the culture was inviting and warm at least outside of your studies?

D'ARBELOFF: It was terrific. I had a lot of really good friends.

CHOI: You were the only woman engineer. Did your friends think you were very different or did they ask what it was like?

D'ARBELOFF: Not particularly.

CHOI: You graduated at the top of your class. What were your professors like?

D'ARBELOFF: Some were good, some were bad. My English professor wanted me to drop engineering and become a writer.

CHOI: You're good at writing too, then.

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, apparently.

CHOI: Did you think about that at all?

D'ARBELOFF: Not at all, because my parents would have taken me out of Stanford and I would have had to go to Northwestern. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: So your parents, I assume, were very proud of you.

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, they were.

CHOI: What were your plans?

D'ARBELOFF: A lot of immigrant parents are kind of like this. If you get a "B" in something or like a 96 instead of 100, they said, "Who got the other points?" [LAUGHS]

CHOI: That's very true, that's like my parents.

D'ARBELOFF: Exactly! It's a profile! If you're first-generation American, you get to hear that kind of stuff all the time. There's all these jokes about Jewish mothers and things like that, but they all were like that!

CHOI: This is my first time hearing the Swedish perspective. I'm Korean-American, and my parents are from Korea, and they were like that. It was a good source of motivation as well, although they were very strict.

D'ARBELOFF: [LAUGHS] Exactly.

CHOI: What were your plans for after graduation? What did you imagine your next step to be?

D'ARBELOFF: I got a job.

CHOI: Working where?

D'ARBELOFF: I worked for Cook Research in Chicago.

CHOI: So you went back to Chicago.

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, and it was government subcontracting work. I learned never to work for the government again.

CHOI: Because?

D'ARBELOFF: Because it's such a corrupt system. Because I was working on a project that they had run out of money for two years before. They were still working on it. I had three charge numbers.

CHOI: How does that work? How can you keep working if there are no funds?

D'ARBELOFF: Because they took money from the projects they hadn't start yet. So I got paid from the projects that hadn't even started. Then there was another charge number if anybody in uniform asked me what I was working on.

CHOI: How long did you work there for?

D'ARBELOFF: A year.

CHOI: What was that like? Were there any other female engineers?

D'ARBELOFF: No.

CHOI: What was that like working as the only woman?

D'ARBELOFF: They didn't work very hard, and they kind of resented it if you worked hard.

CHOI: How long did you work there for?

D'ARBELOFF: A year.

CHOI: What was your next step afterwards?

D'ARBELOFF: I went to MIT.

CHOI: How did you decide that?

D'ARBELOFF: I decided I had to get out of Chicago. So I moved to Boston.

CHOI: How did you choose Boston?



D'ARBELOFF: There were a lot of good schools there, and there was a vibrant economy for start-ups. So I got a job at a start-up called Northern Research that was right in Kendall Square. I was at MIT doing research for these projects I was working on.

CHOI: So you already had ties to MIT through your work.

D'ARBELOFF: I used the engineering library all the time.

CHOI: How long did you work there for?

D'ARBELOFF: I worked there until my daughter was born.

CHOI: When did you start studying?

D'ARBELOFF: I kind of eased into it. I was working full-time while I was studying at MIT. But I was over there all the time, so I would grab a course or two. Then I realized I finally had enough to get a master's.

CHOI: So you were taking courses and then you realized you could get a degree out of it. What was it like taking courses at MIT?

D'ARBELOFF: Very different than Stanford. Much less welcoming.

CHOI: In terms of the community or the students?

D'ARBELOFF: It was a very, very different atmosphere from Stanford.

CHOI: Did that turn you off?

D'ARBELOFF: The guys just didn't know why I was there or what I was doing there.

CHOI: Kind of similar to the advisor you met at Stanford or more hostile?

D'ARBELOFF: Just very dismissive. There's this whole attitude that if you didn't do your undergraduate at MIT, then you didn't know anything. There was this kind of arrogance. During that time, looking back now what we know about learning and the brain and everything, I think a lot of the guys I went to graduate school with were on the spectrum someplace or other. Not good social skills.

CHOI: How did you cope with that?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, I was too busy to really care. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: I guess that's an instrument. That shows strength also, because in many ways that could affect your studies, right?

D'ARBELOFF: In every study that they've shown, people say if you down play what people can do it's not good.

CHOI: Somehow you were just really busy because you were working. Was your work environment better at least?

D'ARBELOFF: It was good. Northern Research was the kind of company that nobody would hire to do the work until they realized there was no way they couldn't have gotten the proposal done. So, when we started any project we were six weeks behind. We would spend a lot of time getting to know whatever subject we were supposed to know about and write a proposal.

CHOI: Did you find your work interesting?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes. It was total research project, design fairy tales. [LAUGHS] We would build these things.

CHOI: Can you give an example?

D'ARBELOFF: Any kind of space shot. A lot of rocket science. A lot of transliterating Russian fluid dynamic papers, because the Russians were really strong in fluid dynamics. And if you can transliterate a science paper by just having the Cyrillic and transfer that into Roman characters, you can read them, because transliterated papers in science are very readable because all the equations are there. There's not much confusion.

CHOI: So you were working a lot with that. I know that you were so busy, but did you get any other social feel for the MIT atmosphere at the time?

D'ARBELOFF: I was in graduate school. Graduate students are pretty isolated.

CHOI: What was your department like?

D'ARBELOFF: I still know a lot of those people.

CHOI: You still keep in contact with a lot of the people? You remain friends with them?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: That's really nice. In terms of taking classes, again, were you one of few women?

D'ARBELOFF: It was only me.

CHOI: In terms of just sitting in the class, did you interact a lot with the professor or with the students? I interviewed one alumna and she dropped out of MIT after a year. She did say that one professor would always pick on her and call on her, which was very troubling for her. It partially led to her dropping out. Was there any of that?

D'ARBELOFF: No, fortunately, no. There was a philosophy professor at Stanford that I could probably put a nice case against.

CHOI: Thankfully you didn't see any of that at MIT. Did you meet your husband at MIT?

D'ARBELOFF: No, actually we met on the stairs at 330 Marlborough Street after a cocktail party. [LAUGHS] I didn't actually know he went to MIT for, like, two dates.

CHOI: He didn't talk about school or any of that? He found out you went to MIT?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: What was he studying at MIT?

D'ARBELOFF: He studied engineering. He had his undergraduate degree in engineering.

CHOI: Was he from the Cambridge/Boston area?

D'ARBELOFF: No, from Connecticut. First New York, then Connecticut. He loved MIT. I thought he was so weird [LAUGHS] It's what of these, "You loved MIT, really? Seriously?"

CHOI: Did you ask him why he loved MIT so much?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, it was a guys' school. He was in a fraternity in Sigma Chi. He lived the whole MIT thing. He worked in the kitchen and stuff like that.

CHOI: How far along were you at MIT before you met him?



D'ARBELOFF: I had graduated.

CHOI: Oh, you had.

D'ARBELOFF: So I wasn't going to MIT; I was leaving to go back to Stanford to get a doctorate.

CHOI: Right when you met him.

D'ARBELOFF: Like six weeks before I was supposed to go off to Europe, and then back to Stanford.

CHOI: What were you going to do in Europe?

D'ARBELOFF: Just travel around.

CHOI: How fun! You didn't end up going to Stanford because you got married?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: What a twist of things. So you got married.

D'ARBELOFF: It turned out he didn't realize I was leaving.

CHOI: What?

D'ARBELOFF: [LAUGHS] He didn't realize I was leaving, and we found out 10 years ago. He's a little vague about stuff.

CHOI: Well he was lucky at the time because he caught you right before you left.

D'ARBELOFF: That's right. But I thought the reason he asked me to marry was so quickly was because he knew I was otherwise would be off in California. That had nothing to do with it!

CHOI: That's a romantic surprise 10 years ago, to find out it was solely because he just wanted to marry you. So you got married here, and then did you settle in the area? You were working at the time, no?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: Obviously he knew you were very smart, so he didn't at all discourage your working?

D'ARBELOFF: No, actually I was making more money than he was. Not by much. He was starting a company, Teradyne.

CHOI: At the time he was starting that, and you were already working at Northern Research. You remained there.

D'ARBELOFF: Actually my roommate and best friend married my boss at Northern Research.

CHOI: She was your best friend before she married your boss?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, Jack was always looking for people to do secretarial work late at night because we worked like 90 hours a week.

CHOI: You were going to school at one point at the same time? Can I ask you then, what was your time management like? Did you not sleep at all? How did you manage such a heavy workload?

D'ARBELOFF: Just fit it in when I could.

CHOI: That's quite amazing. You said you left once you had your daughter? When did you have your daughter?

D'ARBELOFF: In 1964.

CHOI: How long had you been Northern Research?

D'ARBELOFF: Since 1958.

CHOI: Did you stay at home and raise her?

D'ARBELOFF: First of all, I was working part-time when she was a baby. The minute she got old enough to demand things, like when she was a year old, like "Draw de dog." I can't "draw de dog, the heat transfer system here!" I decided I should take some time off.

CHOI: So you were working part-time initially when she was an infant. Was that difficult?

D'ARBELOFF: That's really hard to balance.

CHOI: *A lot of women in the media have been debating that.*

D'ARBELOFF: It's really, really hard, and if you drop out it's hard to go back into a technical field.

CHOI: *In your case, what are your two cents on the whole career...*

D'ARBELOFF: I think we should have better daycare. The problem is that everybody has to invent her own system.

CHOI: *How many children did you have? Wow, what a beautiful family (looking at a photo)! Can I go see the photos over there?*

D'ARBELOFF: Sure. She's the first one. He's the second one, he's the third one, and she's the fourth.

CHOI: *Is this you? You are so gorgeous here and also now.*

D'ARBELOFF: I still like them! [LAUGHS, POINTING AT FAMILY PHOTO]

CHOI: *Is your husband Swedish?*

D'ARBELOFF: No, he was Russian.

CHOI: *So you have a Russian-Swedish-American family.*

D'ARBELOFF: His mother was born in St. Petersburg. His father was born in Georgia.

CHOI: *Was his father Russian as well?*

D'ARBELOFF: He was Georgian. Want to see the picture of the whole group?

CHOI: *So you had been working part-time with your first daughter then you took time off?*

D'ARBELOFF: I stopped working for almost 10 years.

CHOI: *What was that like? The best time of your life? Did you miss working?*



D'ARBELOFF: Yes, I missed working because the minute you quit working, nobody knows what to say to you.

CHOI: I've never heard that before.

D'ARBELOFF: It's just the children; nobody can think about anything to talk about. I don't know why, maybe it's better now.

CHOI: You had your children and then how far apart they space, year-wise?

D'ARBELOFF: Two years, each one.

CHOI: Isn't that a lot of work staying at home to raise four children?

D'ARBELOFF: It's a lot of work. When I started going back to work it was so nice to be in a place where nobody threw their coat on the floor when they walked through the front door. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: Where did you start working when you went back to work?

D'ARBELOFF: I worked for a small software company in Waltham.

CHOI: So you had said that it's hard to go back into the technical field.

D'ARBELOFF: It is because you have to be constantly up to date because the technology changes over time.

CHOI: How did you make that decision to go back to work?

D'ARBELOFF: The software industry happened, and before I left engineering I realized I was really good at it. Learning a language and going back into it in manufacturing software was just an opportunity. It was really fun. That was before computer science degrees and everything, and the number of programmers, they were from all walks of life because it depended on how spatial your brain was. Now it's become kind of a guy thing, but it was so much fun. I mean, on one side of me sat a woman who wanted to be a concert pianist and she realized she wasn't good enough.

CHOI: How interesting. So were there a number of women there?

D'ARBELOFF: Oh, a lot of women because if you were good at it you could just do it. By the time Kate, my oldest, went to Carnegie Mellon for computer science, it had become this geeky guy thing. You look at the numbers of women in computer science and they've just plummeted.

CHOI: Why do you think that has happened?

D'ARBELOFF: Because it's not welcoming.

CHOI: It's more of a social kind of epidemic.

D'ARBELOFF: It's a social kind of epidemic.

CHOI: So there can be work done to alleviate that situation, no?

D'ARBELOFF: It would be really good.

CHOI: It would be ideal. Because you saw a point where it was very welcoming.

D'ARBELOFF: Oh, you have no idea how much fun it was.

CHOI: It sounds like a myth.

D'ARBELOFF: Because we were breaking all these kind of borders. It was right when the PC was coming out, and I worked for Digital [Digital Equipment Corporation] at the time, and the guy who ran Digital thought that the PC was just a toy. He was so wrong.

CHOI: You were working there for how long?

D'ARBELOFF: I worked at Digital for a couple years.

CHOI: When did you decide to move on?

D'ARBELOFF: I had an opportunity to go into the clothing business.

CHOI: Really?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: How did that happen?

D'ARBELOFF: Because a friend of mine was a retailer. There was a store that was available.

CHOI: *You are very stylish. Are you still in the clothing business?*

D'ARBELOFF: Not anymore.

CHOI: So that was a fun venture, right?

D'ARBELOFF: *Well, not as fun as I had planned.*

CHOI: But you went into that for how long?

D'ARBELOFF: We owned the store for 11 years. I only worked there for five.

CHOI: *What was the name of your store?*

D'ARBELOFF: Charles Sumner. Now it's something else on Newbury Street, the first block of Newbury Street.

CHOI: *You've tried so many different things.*

D'ARBELOFF: I have.

CHOI: It seems then that you're the type that can pick up new things really fast.

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: You were involved with MIT throughout, or how was this happening?

D'ARBELOFF: My husband was involved. He was on the Corporation, and we were actually planning to move out to California because our kids lived out there at the time.

CHOI: Were they in college?

D'ARBELOFF: They were working.

CHOI: Where in California were you going to move to?

D'ARBELOFF: San Francisco.

CHOI: Do you really love California?



D'ARBELOFF: I love it.

CHOI: So you were going to move, but then what happened?

D'ARBELOFF: Then Alex [husband Alexander d'Arbeloff, co-founder of Teradyne] became chairman of the [MIT] Corporation. It was an offer that he could not pass up. Then I kind of got dragged into it. It was either that or never seeing him.

CHOI: What kind of things did you work on?

D'ARBELOFF: We referred to that time as 'meals on time for the d'Arbeloffs'. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: That whole period, actually, aren't you on the [MIT Corporation] Board right now?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, I'm a marital.

CHOI: So you've been on since then. Professor Margery Resnick, whom I work for, so she got a grant, the d'Arbeloff grant. How would you describe this grant?

D'ARBELOFF: This program was my husband's favorite project.

CHOI: What is it called?

D'ARBELOFF: It's to help professors innovate and improve their teaching.

CHOI: Your husband came up with this idea?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, we talked about it a lot. We donated the money for it.

CHOI: One thing I did remember hearing from your [2009 MIT Infinite History] interview with Karen Arenson was that it was as simple as having the money available so that professors could try things like have mud cards, which a lot of people would not even think there's a whole process behind it.

D'ARBELOFF: It makes a tremendous difference. We're not super good at training teachers in college. I know so many graduate students who are just panic stricken that they're going to have to teach. There's not a lot of help.

CHOI: Is there training for graduate students?

D'ARBELOFF: There's beginning to be more, but it's not like getting an education degree.

CHOI: *It's incredibly different. I remember having TAs and feeling like I couldn't even hear them.*

D'ARBELOFF: And it's particularly difficult—my son Matt went to RPI [Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute], and he dropped out of engineering and transferred the University of Arizona. He said, "The only thing I got out of RPI was a really good Pakistani accent." [LAUGHS]

CHOI: From the TA?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes.

CHOI: Did all your children go into science?

D'ARBELOFF: We tried. Kate got a degree in computer science and then she got a degree in Fine Arts at Parsons [School of Design].

CHOI: Wow!

D'ARBELOFF: She painted a painting right there of the guy sitting at the desk.

CHOI: Your family is very multi-talented!

D'ARBELOFF: We're not necessarily multi-talented [LAUGHS]; we just seem to have a short attention span.

CHOI: That counts as very talented in my mind. That's absolutely gorgeous. So she paints now?

D'ARBELOFF: No. She now works for a travel and planning company in Recife, Brazil.

CHOI: So she's tried all these different things.

D'ARBELOFF: She ran a store in Amsterdam for a while.

CHOI: You have an adventurous spirit in your family tree.

D'ARBELOFF: Apparently. My son went to RPI and he ended up being an economist. He now started a company in Watertown.

CHOI: He's close by to you now.

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, he's got two kids, and he is the reason we go out to Cancun so much because his wife was born in Mexico.

CHOI: And you can visit your daughter in Brazil as well. And your other two kids?

D'ARBELOFF: Eric and his partner Howard have one son, Lucas; I showed you in the picture. They run a film distribution company and do some production work for the movies. They have the coolest movie out right now. It's called, "In a World."

CHOI: Where is it playing?

D'ARBELOFF: It's playing at the Coolidge Corner Theater.

CHOI: I love that theater; I live in Brookline.

D'ARBELOFF: This woman wrote it, stars in it, directed it, and it's about the voiceover business. It's the funniest, most wonderfully put together movie. The cast is terrific.

CHOI: I saw Blue Jasmine two weeks ago, and I was thinking I want to go back and watch another movie.

D'ARBELOFF: It's still in the theater now. It's just wonderful.

CHOI: So Kate, Eric, and your other daughter?

D'ARBELOFF: My other daughter who hates that picture because she says it makes her look like she has no arms. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: Is she in the area?

D'ARBELOFF: She lives in San Francisco, and she's got four kids. They're all three years apart.

CHOI: So you get to see them as well in California. You have a lot of posts to visit. So you've kept up with this MIT work; have you had other things that you've been working on?



D'ARBELOFF: Then I wrote six novels, none of which have been published.

CHOI: Wow, really? So you did express your writing side!

D'ARBELOFF: Then I belonged to this play group that does a play once a year.

CHOI: What is it called?

D'ARBELOFF: It's called the Emory Bag. They have this silly play every May.

CHOI: You act in it?

D'ARBELOFF: I act in it, and I was a drug dealer last time. It was all about medical marijuana.

CHOI: You just did this play in May? And you'll do it next May?

D'ARBELOFF: No, we do a different play every year. A friend of mine and I both help write these things.

CHOI: Oh wow, you write them? When did you start writing then?

D'ARBELOFF: When I stopped going to the store.

CHOI: How did this happen? Is this something you had been thinking of doing for a long time?

D'ARBELOFF: I always wrote for newsletter and papers and things.

CHOI: In terms of plays and novels, that's a big deal!

D'ARBELOFF: It would have been a big deal if I had been able to get an agent.

CHOI: I don't think so, because it's a craft. A lot of people spend so much time and effort on writing, and the fact that you're pursuing something completely different from engineering—your English professor once saw this in you that you could be a writer. So you continue to write now?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, now I'm too busy.

CHOI: So what are you busy with?

D'ARBELOFF: I'm on the board of Whitehead [the Whitehead Institute] and on something called the Research Advisory Council, which highlights medical research at the MGH [Massachusetts General Hospital]. I've just stepped down last fall as chair of the Council for Arts at MIT. I'm still on there.

CHOI: What did you do with them?

D'ARBELOFF: The Council for the Arts, there's about 100 people, and they donate a certain amount of money each year to promote the arts at MIT.

CHOI: How did you get involved with that?

D'ARBELOFF: When Alex became chair of the Associate Board of the Arts, Alan Brody [MIT Professor of Theater Emeritus] invited me for lunch and said, "You should join the Council." So I got involved. It's really fun. It's a great group of people. We take terrific trips together.

CHOI: You figure out ways to improve the arts culture at MIT?

D'ARBELOFF: Exactly.

CHOI: That's so important for the students.

D'ARBELOFF: It's amazing. That's how you make good engineers.

CHOI: How so?

D'ARBELOFF: Because if you don't have a creative side, you're going to do some pretty stultifyingly dull engineering projects.

CHOI: That's a good way to think of it. Because a lot of people would think that it's unnecessary.

D'ARBELOFF: No it's not at all. It's really important. We have a student body that comes in—80% of the incoming freshmen are practically pre-professional in some form of the arts. It's very often music because that tends to go along with math and physics. But it can be pretty much anything. When you look at the dance teams, they win every award. Did you know how that started? It was during the end of the 1960s, beginning of the 1970s when everybody was dancing and there was a little sign up on one of the bulletin boards. It said, "If you are interested in learning touch dancing" which is ballroom dancing, "Come to room something"

and they had so many people that they had to move it to the Sala [MIT's Sala de Puerto Rico, Stratton Student Center]. It just started. My gosh, those kids are amazing. If you go to a meeting to a lecture at night, you see them practicing in the hallway with a boom box.

CHOI: So you've been involved in so many aspects of the MIT culture and lifestyle, which is really funny because you had such a positive experience at Stanford, but at MIT it was a little harsh. Then again, your work has been to try to improve the lifestyle.

D'ARBELOFF: Exactly. Have you heard of WTP? It's a group of 20 women in mechanical engineering and 40 women in electrical engineering that between their junior and senior year of high school they are good at math and science, but it never occurred to them to become engineers. It's a four-week program on what an engineer does. I usually have lunch with them the first day they are there. By lunchtime I tell them they know more about what engineers do than when I graduated from Stanford. It's in the summer.

CHOI: How do you pick the students who come? They apply?

D'ARBELOFF: They apply. They're from all over the country.

CHOI: It happened this summer already. Did you speak with them this year?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, they were a great group.

CHOI: How neat! So you meet a lot of students, you interact with a lot of the faculty I'm assuming too. You're very integrated at all the different levels of this process. Right now what are your interests and your passions? That's a big question.

D'ARBELOFF: Going from one thing to the other.

CHOI: You're always busy. Have you always been this busy?

D'ARBELOFF: Busy is good.

CHOI: So you like being busy. You must be the queen of time management to juggle all these things.

D'ARBELOFF: Well sometimes I really drop the ball. [LAUGHS] I'm schedulely-challenged.



CHOI: I would say overall you're schedulely-gifted. What are your most important projects right now?

D'ARBELOFF: I'm on a non-profit called Rogerson Communities. We provide low-cost housing for mostly elderly, but there's a few other programs too there. There's people who are HIV positive, and there's one for low-income families in the Boston area. We've got something like 26 different... We do things—like adult day health, which is just incredible—because if you have an elderly person to take care of, it means you only have one income in the family, unless there is a way for that person will be taken care of. Meds, they need to be fed and everything. The bus picks up all these people and they come and they really enjoy projects.

CHOI: How did you get involved with this?

D'ARBELOFF: A friend of mine was chair of the board, and she invited me to an event. I had four members of my family between 90–100 years old during the 1990s. I was responsible for finding places where they could be. I went to a lot of facilities, and they were wildly expensive and really awful. There were not a lot of happy people.

CHOI: My grandmother raised me. A lot of people don't think about elders especially when you're younger, but our goal is to get older.

D'ARBELOFF: And be happy. Both my mother and mother-in-law were really crabby people by the time they got older. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: It's understandable. I just think that at least in this country from what I've seen, we don't highlight the fact that we want to make it to an older age.

D'ARBELOFF: It's such a youth culture. I mean and people are just doing horrible things to their faces!

CHOI: That's very true.

D'ARBELOFF: They all look the same. It's kind of vaguely feral-looking.

CHOI: I agree completely! Everyone looks very crazy.

D'ARBELOFF: Way too alert in the first place!

CHOI: Besides this whole anti-aging movement, I believe culturally for us and I feel maybe you feel the same too, but there's a respect for elders that is missing.

D'ARBELOFF: It does not exist here.

CHOI: For me it was shocking when I saw the facilities as well. It's hard. It's tough. So I'm really interested in what you do.

D'ARBELOFF: This is a really nifty organization. We just finished a facility in Chinatown called the Hong Walk House. It's for aging Chinese in that community.

CHOI: So you do a lot of work all over Boston. You're on the Board.

D'ARBELOFF: I'm now Chair of the Board, because Shelley, who was Chair of the Board, when he retired he was the CFO at Bentley College, and he retired and went to vacation out a Palm Springs, California. He happened to see a house for sale, and there he is! When I'm attending multiple meetings I think, well, at least it was the coldest winter in California [LAUGHS] in decades!

CHOI: You must stay very busy with this. And you're still writing?

D'ARBELOFF: No, I'm not writing anymore.

CHOI: Do you want to keep writing?

D'ARBELOFF: I'm too busy with the other stuff. It's another part of my life now.

CHOI: Do you foresee yourself writing again in the future?

D'ARBELOFF: I could.

CHOI: Are you going to do the play next year in May?

D'ARBELOFF: We never plan until the last minute.

CHOI: You should let me know when you do it. If I'm in the area I'd like to see it!

D'ARBELOFF: [LAUGHS] Then we wouldn't be able to get any actors, because if anybody other than the club sees it—we used to drag the husbands in for dress rehearsal.

CHOI: People don't come to watch your show?

D'ARBELOFF: It's a big club. There's a hundred people and maybe only 10–15 that are in the play.

CHOI: Then I will definitely try to come if I'm in the area!

D'ARBELOFF: I didn't write this year's play, but my friend wrote it, who is absolutely a riot. It was about our old ladies club getting into medical marijuana and growing it in our gardens.

CHOI: That's a controversial subject. That must have been fun!

D'ARBELOFF: It was very funny. I played what they thought was a drug dealer. We were going to sell little bags with floral gingham to put the pot in. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: That's pretty creative.

D'ARBELOFF: It was very funny.

CHOI: As you lead this life where you are doing a lot of different things, you've seen a lot of different areas and different fields, do you still think of yourself as an engineer at the core?

D'ARBELOFF: Yes, that training is there whenever you attack something.

CHOI: *In terms of being creative and in terms of figuring out problems. I know that you probably know this, but we definitely talked about this when I was at school, but the idea that humanities are important to engineers as well because they need to learn how to have social skills to be good managers. How did you learn all those skills? How did you pick them up? We got trained, we took specific classes to grow, but you had to, by necessity, figure it out.*

D'ARBELOFF: It might have been because I was doing theater from the time when I was really small.

CHOI: So you've always loved theater.

D'ARBELOFF: My first performance I was in a pantomime. I was a spotted salmon. I was seven.

CHOI: Do you remember what you did as a spotted salmon?



D'ARBELOFF: Well, it was pantomime. I am salmon king of the fish. My grandson Lucas, Eric and Howard's son, is nine, and he is a musical comedy nut. He's now appearing in his *third play*.

CHOI: So you've always had a theater cord inside of you.

D'ARBELOFF: All through high school there was a theater group at the playground. We did radio shows and things like that.

CHOI: Did you get to act when you were in high school and college?

D'ARBELOFF: Well, it was engineering school, and it was really too busy. I was in I think one or two things going on. It got to be too much.

CHOI: I think it's nice that it's come around to you again. You should continue each year to act with the group.

D'ARBELOFF: Everybody has a good time putting this silly play on.

CHOI: *Marijuana in gingham! What are your future plans?*

D'ARBELOFF: Just do interesting things.

CHOI: Do you have advice for younger women who are trying to figure out their fields after graduating from college or prior to going into college?

D'ARBELOFF: You just have to pick up opportunities. All this business—"I will do this and I will do that"—life is always surprising.

CHOI: I think that's nice to put it that way, because there is a stress that you should know if you want to become a doctor and then go all the way through. But it's *surprising and inspiring to hear stories like of your daughter who has gone and done different things*.

D'ARBELOFF: She just got back from Quebec City, where she was on a business trip.

CHOI: *It is about opportunities and picking them up.*

D'ARBELOFF: She installed a logo, which she had designed.

CHOI: What kind of logo?

D'ARBELOFF: I'll show you. This is the d'Arbeloff family circle. This is Kate's logo.

CHOI: Oh my goodness, wow. So she came up with this. How did she discover that she is an artist?

D'ARBELOFF: Everybody always did art in our family.

CHOI: Your husband as well?

D'ARBELOFF: No, he worked. [LAUGHS]

CHOI: He didn't get to discover his art side.

D'ARBELOFF: Let's see if I can find Lucas in one of his plays.

CHOI: He's so handsome! Where does he live?

D'ARBELOFF: In West Hollywood.

CHOI: He's in Hollywood, maybe one day he will be an actor.

D'ARBELOFF: Well, he already is.

CHOI: That's very true.

D'ARBELOFF: He's got two parents in the movies.

CHOI: Although you did say that you encourage your kids to go into the sciences, you've always encouraged them to explore whatever they want.

D'ARBELOFF: We tried pointing them in a direction. When Eric said that when he graduated from Harvard Business School that he was going to go out and make movies in Hollywood, his dad looked at him and said, "You're telling me that you're leaving a profession." He was a software person. "Where you can actually buy your own food to go into the movies?" [LAUGHS]

CHOI: Now he's doing great!

D'ARBELOFF: He's doing great.

CHOI: You must be very proud.

D'ARBELOFF: No, I'm relieved!

CHOI: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

D'ARBELOFF: No, it's been really fun! It's nice talking to you!

CHOI: Thank you!