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Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Virginia Barker – Class of 1970

(interviewed by Catherine Poon)

July 17, 2011

MIT Women's Oral History Project

Virginia Barker

MIT Class of 1970

Economics and City Planning

This interview was conducted on July 17, 2011 by Catherine Poon, Research Assistant to Professor Margery Resnick, in the home of Virginia Barker in Harvard, Massachusetts.

ALUM: Ginny Barker, Class of 1970 Economics and City Planning

INTERVIEWER: Catherine Poon

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Poon: This is Catherine Poon with the MIT Women's Oral History Project and I'm sitting here with Ginny Barker, MIT Class of 1970 with a major in Economics and City Planning. Ginny, thank you for joining me today. Let's start by talking a bit about how you came to MIT. Where did you grow up?

Barker: So, I grew up in Washington D.C. I went to Sidwell Friends School for all my schooling through high school. And I came to MIT because my math teacher in high school was an MIT graduate. And in our Advanced Calculus class,... I can't remember now, but it must have been Junior Year...He was just such an awesome guy and awesome teacher, and he really got me intrigued with MIT, and he encouraged me. And then, the MIT recruiter came to Sidwell. I can't remember his name for sure, but I think his name might have been Peterson – he was so awesome that I was just sort of sold. So, MIT was my main focus for where I applied. I only actually ever interviewed at Cornell – never actually ended up applying to Cornell, and got into MIT Early Decision, so that's what I did. Now it was odd that when I went to MIT for my interview, it was the day that the guy who interviewed me had gotten all my test score results. And it's just kind of a funny story because he looked at them and looked at me and had this really weird expression on his face. And I

thought, “Oh dear...”, and he said, “You have an 800 on your English Achievement Test. Why are you applying to MIT?” [Laughter] Because back in that day, of course, for certain, it was very much a technical school. So anyways, that’s just kind of amusing. And then, I ended up as an Economics Major, and I didn’t go into one of the super high tech fields. Although, the kind of Economics that we did, its focus was on the sort of technical aspects, and what I did with it for my thesis and in the first job I had after was mathematical economics...and that’s sort of how it tied in. Why I ended up in that major, I don’t know exactly. My mother was an economist, although not at all a mathematical economist, but perhaps that’s why.

Poon: Very interesting. So when you first got to MIT, were you impressed with the academics there? Or did you feel that Sidwell Friends had adequately prepared you for it?

Barker: Well, you know you’re smart if you get into MIT, and so your high school experience was probably one where it wasn’t a huge amount of effort for you to get the grades you got. And that’s all true, but once at MIT, I was pretty overwhelmed. I would say, even having gone to Sidwell, which is a private school with a good work ethic and all that stuff. It was very difficult, and I’m sure that’s true for just about anybody who goes to MIT who wasn’t in the super top "genius echelon". And I remember talking to different people about it and, you know, because MIT is MIT, they have to be able to challenge those people. And so, because they are challenging super brilliant people, the masses of us who are students there had to sort of get our heads around the fact that we were not going to be “A” students at MIT necessarily. So I

ended up, I would say, I think my overall average was a B+ average – which is fine, but you had to adjust to that.

Poon: That is still very impressive! How many women were in your programs?

Barker: I don't remember. Like I said to you in the car, I think at that time, 5% of the whole student body was women. So it was not high. Economics definitely had women in it. There certainly were other degrees that didn't. So I don't remember the numbers at all. We were definitely in the minority and we felt that. So when I was there, there weren't co-ed dorms. And the men's dorms – with one or two exceptions in that particular period – were really horrible, you know, dirty, old, un-renovated; since then things have changed. But the women's dorm was a palace and it was because Mrs. McCormick from the McCormick reaper (farm equipment) Family had been a chemical engineering student in the late 19th century or something at MIT, and she had inherited millions of dollars from her family. And she had died, and left a bunch of money for a ladies dorm – for "ladies to be treated properly", I forgot, there were quotes that we always heard. So it was mostly single rooms. A lot of her artwork and Tiffany lamps were in the lobby. It was a palace. So in fact, one of my best girlfriends from MIT, still jokes about how she went to MIT because the dorms were so fabulous - not such a good reason. So that was a really cool place for the women to live, but otherwise, you were not treated specially. The guys didn't hold the doors open for you – it wasn't anything like that. And that was fine. And I think that, frankly, it was a good learning experience for being a woman in business later because you didn't expect to be treated differently. You weren't treated specially because you were a lady or anything like that. See, I grew up in a family where it

was all women and my mother was the working person. So, this whole thing about women's issues, to me, was never an issue. And, so I was never sensitive about that. I've always felt that a lot of women are overly sensitive about that, and expect treatment they shouldn't expect. They just need to behave professionally and so forth. So, I've had kind of a funny bias about that. I've had people in my work environments in the past tell me that I didn't worry about it enough on my own behalf. And that may have well been true. Anyway, so I think going through that at MIT was helpful in that way.

Poon: That's great. So with only about 5% of women in the student body, were there any female professors? And, did you have any mentors? For example, at Sidwell Friends, you said that you found a mentor that pushed you and helped you find an area that you felt confident and wanted to pursue. So, were there any female mentors there for you in that way?

Barker: No.

Poon: Did you gravitate towards anyone?

Barker: I didn't. However, I did know a couple of girls who did. Professor Margaret MacVicar – who died in 1991. I remember there were a few of the girls who became friends with her.

Poon: So, you didn't feel that there was any hand-holding for women?

Barker: No, there was a Dean and Dottie Bowe was her assistant, who was much more hands on with us girls. And Dottie was a good person who you could go to and talk to. She wasn't a professor; she was sort of an administrative sort. But, no, I have no memory

whatsoever of how many female professors there were. Certainly, the President of the University wasn't a woman.

Poon: Yes, I've been thinking about that. And I think that it's been a debate that's come up. Because if you're looking for a mentor, you know, that can obviously help you and give you a lot of confidence, but if there aren't any mentors, then you have to have a different mentality and teach yourself. Do you think that not having a mentor has helped you?

Barker: Well, I just think that's the way I am. And I'm not saying it's a good way to be particularly either. I think that mentors help you in college. My son was helped tremendously by a professor that he hooked up with. I don't think he would have gone for a Master's degree if he hadn't had that connection with that professor. So I think there's a great advantage to hooking up with a professor in that way – a mentoring way. But that's not ever been my tendency, so I can't say whether, in fact, it was easy or hard to do that when I was there because I don't think that that was my orientation. I remember Professor Harris in the Economics Department – a man – who was wonderful.

Poon: What kind of activities were you involved in other than your academics? What did you do with your spare time?

Barker: Not much.

Poon: You didn't have very much spare time?

Barker: No, I was pretty much studying. I mean, I had a couple of boyfriends on and off – who were MIT guys. I did go into the city. There was a family out in Arlington that I would go visit occasionally. Wow, I hadn't thought about that in a long time.

Poon: Looking back at your time at MIT, what do you think that are some valuable lessons that you learned?

Barker: So, I was an Econometrics-oriented person and City Planning was my Minor. And my first job – for about the first four years of that job – I used econometrics. But after that, never ever again have I used anything directly that I studied. So, I always said that I thought what was really fabulous about MIT was that it teaches you how to think.

Poon: Right, problem solving. That's great. I hear that a lot from people who have already graduated MIT that they don't necessarily remember all the facts they learned in class, but remember all the skill sets that they learned at MIT.

Barker: Yes, it's all indirect. But, you know, I've always thought that. So, I've never regretted it at all.

Poon: So, I saw that you went to BU for graduate school. What kinds of difference or similarities did you see between grad and undergrad life?

Barker: Right, so that wasn't pure grad school. That was a program for people in business for which you got a certificate. So, it's very different from grad school. But, it was fine and it was of high quality...it was in essence professors out of their MBA program that focused on people in business. And it was the full spectrum of MBA-ish stuff, but just not that formal.

Poon: Were there a lot of women in that program?

Barker: I don't remember, but I don't have a sense that there were a whole lot of women.

Poon: After graduation and the BU program, what were some of the expectations for you as a woman? Was it understood that you would go into the workforce or were there other gender pressures of family or other occupations that you were pushed into?

Barker: So, as I said before, because of the way I was brought up in my [all female, working-mother] family unit, I didn't think of myself as a woman I was a professional. And I always just expected that I would have a family and a career. So, it was sort of never an issue. I did, in fact, get married to a guy that I grew up with in D.C. who transferred to MIT my junior year. So, I did get married pretty quickly after. But, you know, I had a career and all that happened simultaneously with no particular thought. And I was lucky that I was able to do that. And then, in later years, I was lucky that my second husband and I had an income that allowed us to have nannies for our kids growing up.

Poon: So, a lot of professional women talk a lot about the balance between work and family, and it sounds like it was just assumed for you. Were there any difficulties that you found?

Barker: Well, sure. It's always difficult because you can't be Superwoman. That's the problem that I think women have.

Poon: Do you have any advice for other women who are thinking about doing the same?

Barker: Well, I actually had the wife of one of my bosses at my first company tell me once that you just have to understand up front that you can't be Superwoman, and you can't be perfect at everything. And so, it's a level that you have to decide in your family unit with your husband, or partner, how is it that you are going to make this work. And what's the split? And what's the approach? Are you going to have

nannies or are you not? What are you going to do? Are you going to work part time in order to be at home more with the kids? So, you have to get your own comfort level with that, and know that if you were just a career woman or just a mother, you might make different choices and do things differently. So, it's just part of life's choices. Now, it's harder for women because I think men sort of don't – even today, except there are very progressive marriages – but generally speaking, men don't really have to make that choice. It's the women that are making the choice and feel that extra heat, I think. And, I can remember vague memories of feeling judged here and there by people who didn't think that it was appropriate to be a working mother. But, that is certainly much less of an issue now. That really was a long time ago.

Poon: Do you think that your daughter is going to face the problems or challenges as you did?

Barker: No, but I think it still varies industry to industry, job type to job type. So, my daughter is going to be a doctor. I don't think that it is going to be an issue. I mean, just society is incredibly different than it was 45 years ago, so it's just going to be different. But each individual woman still has those choices to make about career and family values. And, you better be sure that you are married to somebody who doesn't have any hang-ups about that. That is critical.

Poon: So, I was taking a look at your resume which is very impressive by the way. And, I saw that you have moved from job to job, but always in a management position. And I was wondering, what was the hardest transition for you? I see that you moved all the way to Houston at one point?

Barker: Oh, no, I was always in Boston. When Compaq bought Digital, the job that I had in Digital here in engineering, they wanted me to duplicate for the engineering groups in Houston. So, I traveled to Houston every other week for about a year until I quit because I hated it. So, I didn't actually move. Now, the way that Digital Equipment Corporation worked, it was a huge company for many years. It had facilities all over New England, and so, if you worked for Digital, the odds are that your office moved from facility to facility. And, in my career because I had a family, I just opted to never take jobs that caused me to physically relocate. I did travel in various amounts for different kinds of jobs I had there, but I never fully moved.

Poon: That must have been a lot of traveling every other week!

Barker: Well, it was just for that last year that I was there. And, it would have been fine, but I didn't want to move there... When one company purchases another, it's not a happy time. And I was supposedly very lucky because they wanted me to do what I was doing before, instead of firing me – the way that the purchasing company (Compaq) people used to treat everyone from Digital – it was very bad, so I just couldn't handle it anymore. I was 50 by then, so my age played into it... And at different age points, you make different life choices.

Poon: I read your publication about changing the existing processes of organizations, did you experience any difficulties or pushback? Were there any challenges?

Barker: So, I think that most of the time I was at Digital, most of what I was about was changing how Digital operated internally. And so, yes, I met a great deal of resistance, and so, that is a very difficult sort of job to have. And, it was stressful, and as time passed and as we got into the period when Digital was not doing so well

financially, you meet with more resistance because layoffs are happening and a lot is going on, so people get very paranoid when you are trying to change what they do and thereby threaten their jobs – in their heads, whether that was true in all cases or not. So, having that job where you're driving change carries with it all that kind of baggage.

Poon: How do you learn how to be a leader? How did you learn to be in that position where you can manage people and really push them to change their odd habits? What kind of qualities do you think one needs to have? Is it something that is learned or something that is just inherent in your personality?

Barker: Well, I think that people either have in their bootstraps the capabilities to be a leader or they don't. That being said, you might have those capabilities and may never figure out how to use them. Wow, I haven't thought about this for ages, but I think there's a speech in there in my resume where I gave a speech on leadership, but I have no memories of the details of that at all.

Poon: You mentioned that your family played a role in that you came from a family of mostly women, and your mom was kind of a role model in that way and provided an environment of a "can-do" attitude.

Barker: Yes, the environment that you're working in helps or doesn't help you sometimes. So Digital was the kind of company where people could rise to their level of expertise and specialness – even women. Although, this is a place where some people had advised me in later years that I might have moved further if I had been more assertive about women not being treated correctly. But generally speaking, it was a company that women were generally treated well. And so, there was a lot of opportunity there.

So, if you are in an environment that offers you an opportunity and you have the basic capabilities, then, I think, the rest is what I'm sort of having trouble articulating. I think, to be a good leader, you have to be able to understand enough of the work so that you don't need to be able to do all the work of the people that you lead or manage – and indeed, I managed software engineers for many years, my husband being one of them actually – and he always said, it didn't make any difference that I didn't know how to code, but I knew all the right questions to ask of the people who did. So, you have to have a sort of knowledge at a level that helps you help your folks see the bigger picture, and be able to communicate with them in ways that pushes them to their max and enables them to maximize their impact. You have to have empathy. You have to be able to take the heat. I'm sure that there is a standard list of characteristics that good leaders and managers have to have... You have to have passion for what you are leading.

Poon: That's great advice.

Barker: So, it's a mixture of basic capability in yourself and an environment that enables you, and then, these other characteristics... And you do have to be able to comprehend what is going on at your level and above you, and figure out how to make this work that you're in charge of successful, in whatever that environment that is, and look out for yourself because you are the agent of your organization.

Poon: This sounds like a lot of future planning, knowing your potential, and pushing others.

Barker: Yes, I would say that something that is disturbing in American business is that the higher people get, the more their egos are in charge of everything they do. That was

one of the things that I got burned out about in the end, and so, I was happy to leave and buy a kitchen design business.

Poon: So, tell me more about that. What made you go into that?

Barker: Well, who knows? I was a workaholic for many years, so it was my job and my family, and then, my husband and I play golf. So, what do you do if you just decide that you're burnt out on high tech? And, I just had my kitchen redone. And when I was a kid, I used to draw house plans and random stuff like that. Maybe that's why I liked doing city planning in college. So, I just decided I could do that, and I took an Industry course that was offered – that was awesome. And then, I just stumbled into a woman who was getting ready to retire and sell her business in Concord – which is a perfect place for such a business. So it was just perfect timing – sort of a magical thing. And speaking of daughters, when it happened, my daughter said: “Mom, I’m so proud of you. You’ve completely reinvented yourself at the age of 52.” It is cool except for the economy right now being terrible for that kind of business, but I adore it... This is a job where I am able to be creative and do things that people adore – so that's kind of cool.

Poon: Do you think that it's possible for other women in their 40s and 50s to reinvent themselves and jump to another career? Do you think that it would be difficult?

Barker: Sure, it's totally possible. For me, that was a complete luck out because I had no hobbies. I think, it's better if you have more hobbies that I do. Golf was my only hobby, so it was pretty limiting because most people's second career has something to do with their hobbies. There is a guy who does cabinet installation for me when I need it who was an ex-Digital guy, and woodworking was his hobby. So, he took a

retirement package and wanted to do the woodworking thing. So, this worked out. Usually, it's some evolution of a hobby. But, for me, it wasn't. It was pulling something out of my memories and my childhood desires that I had never tapped into before, and it just fit perfectly. And, it was purely accidental and wonderful that it happened.

Poon: That's great that it's working out. What would you say was the most memorable moment in your professional life? Which job did you feel the most proud of?

Barker: Well, I'm the most proud of the time at Digital when I ran that Artificial Intelligence group that configured all Digital's computers, because I took it from a pretty small R&D group into a hugely world famous production group that saved Digital about 100 million dollars. Huge amounts of money were saved at Digital. And, it enabled me to have exposure right up to Ken Olsen who was the President of the company at the time. It gave me exposure outside of Digital because it was our artificial intelligence software program that was the first one in the world that was ever used in hardcore mission-critical daily production. It is just an awesome thing to look back and have experienced.

Poon: That's wonderful. So, just to wrap up and reflect about your time at MIT, do you keep in touch with any of your MIT friends?

Barker: So, my best two girlfriends were at MIT with me. One was my freshman year roommate and the other wasn't. And, actually, the other one didn't stay at MIT because she got married and transferred to Berkeley.

Poon: What did your roommate end up majoring in?

Barker: She was in EE – Electrical Engineering. Her name is Paula Fines – her maiden name when she was a student was Haughey.

Poon: And, is she in the Boston area? Do you keep in touch?

Barker: Yes. And yes, we do keep in touch. Her daughter's my goddaughter. She lives in Tewksbury. She's about to move to southern New Hampshire. She's retired. She worked for many, many years at Lucent which was AT&T and Bell Labs – all in this area. And then, my other girlfriend was a math major at MIT. At Berkeley, she was a Sociology major and then she came back to New England and got a law degree at Suffolk. And they are both retired now.

Poon: And, have you visited MIT since your graduation?

Barker: Yes. I went to a couple of interesting lectures a few years back, but I don't go regularly. I'm not a good alum.

Poon: Oh, I'm sure that's not true. MIT just celebrated their 150th anniversary. Did you see any of the festivities on the river?

Barker: No, I didn't. The last thing that I remember doing at MIT was a reunion of women at the dorm. And at dinner, I was lucky enough to be seated at the table with one of my girlfriends and the President. And she was awesome. I was impressed. It is so cool to be a woman from back when we were at MIT and see a woman as the President. It's just sort of hard to understand almost. It's very cool. But, just sort of a segue off of that, one of the women – she was actually my Big Sister that they assign to me as a Freshman – was Shirley Jackson, who is the President of RPI. So, it's kind of cool to see another MIT woman. Shirley is a brilliant physicist. She's done all kind of things – and that's been pretty cool.

Poon: So, do you think that MIT has changed since your time there?

Barker: I'm sure it has. I'm sure it's better for women – not as odd. And, I'm sure a lot fewer odd women go there. Back in the day, most of the women were kind of odd.

Poon: But, brilliant odd!

Barker: Exactly! So, I'm sure it's different. The co-ed dorms make it very different, of course, socially – and I think that's better.

Poon: It would be interesting for you to visit McCormick now and see if it's different, if it's just as nice.

Barker: When I went to that dinner about five years ago, it looked the same and I'm sure it's probably the same. But, see what's different now is the only girls who live there are the girls who have hang-ups about being in a co-ed living arrangement – which, I, personally, think is too bad.

Poon: Do you think that it is important to live with men?

Barker: Well, I think it's important to interact with men. So, I remember when I was thinking about going to college and my mother went to Berkeley and she said, "I'm not going to try to tell you where to go to school," except that she didn't want me to go to a women's college – and that was said back in a time when many colleges that now are co-ed, weren't. There was Harvard and Radcliffe, Brown and Pembroke, and all those – they were separated. So, she felt strongly as a woman in business in an era where it was really impossible to make headway as a woman, and she was in the Federal government and she did miraculously well. She just felt that it was a false environment. So, that's part of why I'm saying, to have hang-ups for girls about living in a co-ed dorm, I'm sorry for girls who feel that way. And, everybody's

different. But, I think at some level, that's just the way society is these days. It's part of being integrated and not being treated differently.

Poon: I have definitely heard a lot of different perspectives on women's and single-sex education. And some people say that it is a false environment – we should be dealing with reality without hand-holding, but then other people say that it's great to be able to separate yourself for a few years to find your voice and be empowered, and then go into the world feeling like you can be a leader.

Barker: Going back to the way I was growing up, so that's where I really disagree. For some women, it may have been the way that they had to do it. For me and my opinion about that, if you need to separate yourself out of that to get your head together about it all, then you have a problem. And, that's me being very judgmental. So, I feel like if you want to be right up there with the men in your life - in business and even in your marriage – what's the big advantage of being separated for just a few years. It's just not the way life actually is.

Poon: Well, I think that's all for now. But is there anything that you wanted to add or leave us with today?

Barker: I was always incredibly happy that I went to MIT and when my daughter was applying to colleges, she could go anywhere she wanted. She got into Harvard and Brown and chose Brown Early Decision. And when she was doing her applications, she said, "You know, Mom, I just don't think I want to apply to MIT. My counselor said that especially because of my grades but also because you and my father went to MIT, I should be able to get in, but I don't think it's for me." And I said, "Hey Kel, MIT is not for most people." And I think that is very true. I think it's important to

have picked a school that's the right thing for you in that stage of your life. And I felt that MIT was good for me, and it wouldn't have been good for my daughter, but not because she was a woman, but because she going in a different direction.

Poon: You are a good mother. Well, thanks so much for meeting with me today. It was truly a pleasure.

Barker: This was great. Thank you.

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