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Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Libby Blank – Class of 1961

(interviewed by Catherine Poon)

June 28, 2011

MIT Women's Oral History Project

Libby Blank

MIT Class of 1961

Masters in City and Regional Planning

This interview was conducted on June 28, 2011 by Catherine Poon, Research Assistant to Professor Margery Resnick, in the home of Libby Blank in Boston, Massachusetts.

ALUM: Libby Blank, Class of 1961 Masters in City and Regional Planning

INTERVIEWER: Catherine Poon

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PURPOSE: MIT Women's Oral History Project

Poon: This is Catherine Poon with the MIT Women's Oral History Project and I'm sitting here with Libby Blank, MIT Class of 1961 with a Masters in City and Regional Planning. Libby, thank you for joining me today. Libby, let's start by talking a bit about your undergraduate experience at Sarah Lawrence. If I remember correctly, Sarah Lawrence was an all-women's college until 1968. What do you think of single-sex education?

Blank: When I was there, I thought it would be wonderful if it were co-ed. But after it went co-ed, I wasn't quite sure. Perhaps it wasn't such a great idea. But it was very good. I had gone to public school and this was my first experience with a private school. So it was quite a revelation to me. I don't know if you know, but it was progressive education based on the theories of John Dewey. Everything was seminar. And we did a great deal of reading and writing.

Poon: Do you think that in and outside of the classroom, they catered to women's needs? Were there a lot of discussion and encouragement?

Blank: There were, in fact, courses – none of which I ever took - on women's issues and women's place in society. And I think, the college probably saw itself as a feminist institution – very concerned with women and women's education. But when the

women's movement came along, it was very different – the focus was much more assertive and political than the college.

Poon: And so, after Sarah Lawrence, why did you choose MIT for graduate school?

Blank: I wanted to go into city planning. And there were two schools in Boston, and I only applied to MIT. Harvard had a school at the time. And I had some advice. I had two classmates from high school who had gone into city planning. One went to Harvard and one went to MIT. It was interesting that the one that went to Harvard told me to go to MIT. I guess he thought that it was a better place.

Poon: How many women were in your class or your program at MIT?

Blank: That was an interesting thing. That is the most interesting thing I have to say. There were about five or six women in my class. My class was very small – 16 or 18. And the average was 1.5 women – true to the class behind me and the class ahead of me. One day, we asked the admissions officer for the department, his name was Roland Greeley (who a number of years after I left became Dean of Admissions for the entire Institute) why there were so many women, and he said that's the way the applications fell that year. I'm not sure I ever really believed him. I think some of us suspected that they had made a special effort...because that was, done at the time, it would be done occasionally with minorities, and we thought that maybe they had done it with women.

Poon: So, do you see a big difference between your education at Sarah Lawrence and MIT?

Blank: Oh yes, completely different because MIT was a professional school. It was training you for a profession. Sarah Lawrence was a liberal arts school, and it was much more intellectual and analytical. Very different.

Poon: What was your major at Sarah Lawrence?

Blank: We didn't have those. That's one of the features. I think we were required to take a sort of orientation course first year. We only took three courses a year. We had a three-semester system, but the courses usually ran all year. And we could pretty much take what we wanted.

Poon: Wow, that's very different from MIT in terms of requirements.

Blank: Different from most liberal arts schools, like Wellesley too.

Poon: I really see the value in a liberal arts education. I think that it is a really great experience.

Blank: Oh yes, I have no regrets about that – I would advise anyone to do that.

Poon: What kind of activities were you involved in at MIT? And was there a sense of community that you found in your program?

Blank: Mostly classes. I became more involved with MIT after I graduated. I became involved in MIT community theater for a number of years – which was open to alumni and staff and students, and I think anybody who wanted to be.

Poon: That's great. Looking back at your time at MIT, what was the most valuable lesson that you learned from your experience there?

Blank: I think it had a problem solving focus – which I think in planning is very important. So it did give you tools for analyzing a situation and trying to ameliorate the situation using the information that was provided.

Poon: Do you think that that really helped you in the transition from grad school to the working world? And did you apply that problem solving focus to your jobs?

Blank: No, the working world was very different, but MIT provided basic tools and techniques. When I went to MIT in planning, the faculty felt they were not training us for “the then and the now”. They were training us for the ten or twenty years in the future. They were futurists, really. And it turned out the future was very different. I became increasingly involved in the environment movement. And in the end, I was an environmental planner. But those issues really weren’t courses or programs at the time.

Poon: After your graduation, did you feel that there were certain expectations for you after graduation as a woman? I know that you went to this professional graduate program, but do you think that there were other expectations? Was it necessarily assumed that you were going to be in the working world, or were there other pressures, such as family?

Blank: No, I went to graduate school so I would get a decent job. And when I got out of college, generally the occupations open to women were teaching and being a secretary. And I did that. I was an administrative assistant for a number of years. My motive in going to MIT was to get a profession.

Poon: What was the gap between your graduation at Sarah Lawrence and your admission to the MIT Masters program?

Blank: I got out of Sarah Lawrence in ’53, and I went to graduate school...in ’59...so I worked some years in between. My class was quite diverse; I was not the oldest person in my class. There was an over-30 group in my class, which I never made.

Poon: Do you keep in touch with any of your classmates from MIT?

Blank: Yes, one of my classmates, Joyce Chen, after living in the South, moved here a number of years ago. She is someone I always kept in touch with, and now see regularly.

Poon: Do you think that you keep more in touch with your MIT friends versus your undergrad friends?

Blank: No, I don't think so. They are about the same.

Poon: Have you visited MIT since your time there?

Blank: Yes, I belonged to an organization called, "Friends of Boston Art at MIT." They have programs for us, and I go to the List gallery. In early June, there was a tour of the sculpture on the East Campus. MIT has something that you find sometimes in the public sector. Every time they build a new building, they spend 1% for art at the new building up to a cap of \$250,000. So MIT has a terrific art collection. Its gallery, "The List," shows the most avant-garde art in the Boston area. So if you really want to know what's cutting-edge, it's there.

Poon: Do you think that MIT has changed a lot since you've been there? Or what have you heard about it?

Blank: Yes, I think that it's worked very hard on improving the role of women at MIT – not merely undergraduates, but increasing the number of women faculty – which was very necessary.

Poon: Were there a lot of female professors when you were there?

Blank: My department, I think, there were zero. We were part of the Department of Architecture, and in Planning, there weren't any women. There weren't even teaching assistants. They were all male too. I never thought about that before.

Poon: Did you find that experience intimidating because there were no female role models?

Blank: No, because you didn't expect it. And I didn't even know there was a female architect. The Dean of the Department today is a woman.

Poon: Wow, I guess times have changed.

Blank: Yes, there is a big change. They have made a concerted effort, I think, in the sciences. It was really important and I think MIT have done a good job. MIT reports every once and a while on the status of women at the school. This was the 150th year anniversary. I was planning to go to the celebration at the convention center, but I was sick and didn't make it.

Poon: Did you see how they lit up the Prudential with the lights? That was nice. And there were fireworks and everything. That was lovely.

Blank: I didn't see a lot of the stuff on the river.

Poon: There was a really impressive fireworks show. That's all I saw.

Blank: Yes, there was quite a lot of stuff.

Poon: Do you have any daughters?

Blank: No.

Poon: If you had daughters, would you send them to MIT?

Blank: Well, if they were interested in science, but not if they weren't. Then I would prefer that they go to a liberal arts college.

Poon: That's pretty much all the questions I have, but is there anything that you wanted to add or talk about?

Blank: Well, one of the things that I wanted to say is that... the experience was good - in essence I got a union card by getting a degree there. There was a big demand for

planners at the time, and it was very easy to get a job. You could work wherever you wanted. And I went to work for the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Many years later, I discovered six of us had been hired at the same time, and the three women got lower salaries than the three men.

Poon: Oh really?

Blank: Yes, many years later. I didn't stay there even a year, I moved on, but the women, who were there after me, brought a class action suit because apparently discrimination continued.

Poon: Did you find any of those sort of inequalities in the workplace in your other jobs?

Blank: No, I don't think so. No, I worked for a private consultant afterwards. Then I spent most of my life working for government.

Poon: I think those issues are still apparent in our workforce – the same problems for female graduates, but not quite as much.

Blank: Yes, I think it's harder for women to get ahead. And one of the things – and this is something going into the workforce you should know. I was never told, but discovered after a while – it is very important that you have a mentor at your job or wherever you go. And it doesn't have to be a woman. And you should really cultivate that person because I think I got promotions and things – not because I went looking for a mentor, but someone took me under his wing without my realizing.

Poon: Do you think that's because women are generally more relational than men that they really seek out relationships in environments and that it maybe it helps?

Blank: Well, maybe, but I certainly didn't know to do that, but I think in general in life that's true.

Poon: Yes, that's great advice. I've actually heard that from a lot of women.

Blank: It's the most important thing because, unfortunately, you don't get ahead merely because you're good. You get ahead partly because of who you know, which is understandable in a way, I suppose.

Poon: There are so many qualified people out there.

Blank: So that's my advice to you when you get a job.

Poon: Thank you. I think that's all actually. Is there anything else?

Blank: No, I think that's all...but I feel that MIT was very good to me. It got me to where I wanted to be. It was wonderful.

Poon: That's great to hear. MIT is a great place.

-- END OF INTERVIEW --