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Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Maria Karpati Burka – Class of 1969

(interviewed by Catherine Poon)

July 26, 2011

MIT Women's Oral History Project

Maria Karpati Burka

MIT Class of 1969

B.S in Chemical Engineering

This interview was conducted on July 26, 2011 by Catherine Poon, Research Assistant to Professor Margery Resnick, at the National Science Foundation in Ballston, VA.

ALUM: Maria Karpati Burka, Class of 1969 B.S. in Chemical Engineering

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 Maria Burka, MIT Class of 1969 with a B.S. in Chemical Engineering. Maria, thank you for joining me today. Let's start by talking a bit about how you came to MIT. I see that you grew up in Hungary, but you are a US citizen? What was it like to grow up in Hungary?

Burka: Well, I only lived in Hungary until I was eight, and then, we left Hungary and my family lived in Denmark for two years. So from the age of eight to the age of ten, I lived in Denmark and then, we came to the United States. I moved to New York City when I was ten. New York City public schools are really excellent. The public schools have lots of programs suited to the student. I was always interested in math and science. I took an entrance exam and was admitted to the Bronx High School of Science which back then was the first high school that really focused on students really interested in science and math. I graduate from Science and MIT was just one of the schools that kids from Science often applied to. So, I applied to MIT and I knew I wanted to do something in the sciences or math, but I didn't know too much about engineering yet. So that's how I applied and I got in and went there.

Poon: In high school, did you find that there were any teachers that were mentors that guided you towards the sciences and ultimately pushed you to go to MIT?

Burka: I naturally gravitated towards it. I didn't really have what I would call great mentors in high school. Bronx Science wasn't that kind of school. It fostered us towards the study of math and science. It was a great atmosphere. I remember at my graduation, the Valedictorian giving a talk that he loved Bronx Science because he could be a nerd and nobody made fun of him – which was pretty radical back in those days. Remember, this was 1965. So, it was just a very nice environment. You weren't made fun of if you were a techy nerd – like most of us were, and MIT was just a very natural extension from there.

Poon: Were there a lot of girls in your high school? You said that your high school was a public school.

Burka: There weren't that many then. Now, I'd say it is more 50/50. Back then, we were maybe a third. But Bronx Science actually started out as an all-boys school, and then, it started going co-ed, and by the time that I went there, I think, it was like a third female. But, it had changed. Remember I was there during the Post- Sputnik era. The Russians sent up a rocket into space called Sputnik, and after that, America became very competitive. So, all kinds of revolutionary courses were developed to get kids more interested in the sciences. Bronx Science had a lot of these special courses and I took a bunch of them. One was called BSCS (for biology) – I can't remember exactly what all the initials stood for and ChemStudy for chemistry studies. They were classes that were meant to be more interesting than the dry same old, same old. I think they helped. I took a lot of AP courses. I took AP Physics. I was unusual because I was

the only girl in AP Physics. Teachers were not quite ready for that back then. I will say that the teacher who taught the AP Physics class was not happy to see me, but he adjusted.

Poon: It must have been very difficult in high school. There are a lot of social pressures going on, whereas in college, people have come into their own more and are more assertive and confident. High school is difficult!

Burka: High school was difficult. It was almost as if it was okay to study biology, but physics was for the guys.

Poon: Definitely. I think there's still a stigma around certain sciences and gender.

Burka: But, it was fine. I loved high school. I had a great time. I was always interested. I ran for student government office and won. Bronx Science was a great place. It was a real nurturing place for students who had the interests that I had, so I fit right in.

Poon: So, when you got to MIT, were you impressed with the classes you were in? Did you think that Bronx Science prepared you well for it?

Burka: Yes, Bronx Science was great preparation. I didn't feel the least bit overwhelmed as, unfortunately, some of the other students did. I felt very well prepared. It was just a straight continuation.

Poon: Did you feel challenged at all?

Burka: Very definitely, but MIT let you sort of go at your own pace. Back then there were aspects of MIT which they have cleaned up since --one of them were the weekly a round of quizzes. Every Friday of Freshman year, you would have a quiz. Everybody had to take the same courses. So, the first week would be Physics. The second week would be Calculus, and the third week would be whatever else. That put a lot of

pressure on kids. And quite honestly, they had some unfortunate incidents. Some kids committed suicide, and a lot of kids attempted suicide. MIT came to their senses, and a couple years after I left, they changed the Freshman year to Pass/Fail. It eliminated those dreaded quizzes, so I think things became easier. As I said, because I was really well prepared, it didn't bother me as much as it did to some of the other kids. I felt badly. The typical student who came in from a typical high school was overwhelmed. Also, there were very few women then. We were considered the first big class. There were 46 of us.

Poon: That is a big class compared to what the other alums I've talked to have said. Some said there were only 14 women in their class.

Burka: But, remember, this was 1965 and McCormick Hall had just been built. So, now they had room for us.

Poon: I heard that McCormick was the nicest dorm out of all the living spaces. When they first built it, it was like a palace.

Burka: It was big and beautiful. Mrs. McCormick went all out, and she had her beautiful artwork there. She really cared about the dorm. It was a lovely place to live.

Poon: What were the relationships like with your fellow female roommates? Did you all get along? Was there a sense of camaraderie?

Burka: I think there was a very nice sense of camaraderie. Remember this was the Vietnam War Era, and that created a – not so much, an upset for me because I just wasn't into that sort of thing – but a lot of my fellow students were against the war so that ripped some people apart. But generally speaking, McCormick was a wonderful place to live. We had a great time. Some of my close friends to this day are from back in those

days. In fact, I just finished emailing a friend of mine who I went to MIT with. Her husband and my husband have become friends.

Poon: Do they live in the area?

Burka: Well, they actually live in Boston. They stayed in Boston, but they bought a place in New Hampshire where we actually visited them. About five years ago, my husband and I bought a place in Vermont, so now we see them a lot during the summer. So, we've kept up with them.

Poon: Were there any female professors in your department?

Burka: No, none.

Poon: Did you find that intimidating?

Burka: I was just used to it because I was used to it from Bronx Science. It just didn't affect me. MIT really didn't know what to do with women back then. The Dean of Women was a woman named Emily Wick – I'll never forget her. We used to call her the Banana Lady. She was the world's greatest expert on bananas. She never married and she really wasn't cut out for the job. And so, when you had problems, she would be the last person you would talk to. I think that was unfortunate, but MIT was desperate. I suspect that she must have been one of a very small number of women faculty. I really don't think that she had any idea of how to communicate with the women students. You would try to have a conversation with her and it was just bizarre. In fact, the few professors who were there – especially the older ones – were not the kind of role models that we looked to. We were glad that there were more of us and we hoped that this would change.

Poon: That's too bad.

Burka: But, some of the younger ones were more interesting, so things were changing. But, we always called her the Banana Lady, and that's all I remember about her. I think I had two conversations with her when she came to the dorm for some events.

Poon: What kind of activities were you involved in at MIT? What did you do for fun in your spare time or did you not have any? [laughter]

Burka: Oh, all the time! I was one of those who really did. I was on the sailing team on the Charles and our team was an excellent team. I think we won the Easterns many times. I wasn't that good of a sailor so I typically would crew, and somebody else would be the skipper. We had a great time with that. It must have been my Sophomore or Junior year, we decided to actually row crew. I had always rowed before, and so we actually put together a women's crew team. We rowed against Wellesley, and they killed us because women's and men's shells were different. I was very much involved in student politics which is the kind of thing that always interested me. I had a great time.

Poon: Did you like Boston being in such a great academic city?

Burka: I don't think I got to see much of Boston. It was an MIT focused life. I did a lot of fun things. I thought it was great fun.

Poon: What was your most memorable moment at MIT? What kind of lessons did you learn there?

Burka: Gosh, that's a good question. My most memorable moment was something that we laughed about later. There were two of us women who were majoring in Chemical Engineering – my year. And, the other person is still a friend of mine. She is now a professor at Clarkson. She came from a small town in New Hampshire, and she was

very intense. And, coming from Bronx Science, I was more relaxed, and in fact, I may have screwed off a lot more than I probably should have, but she was very intense.

We had a Sophomore Year Advisor. All of the students in Chemical Engineering were given one of two advisors. It was done alphabetically, and so our last names were close. We had the same advisor. This was a wonderful, wonderful old gentleman. He must have by then been in his 60s, but he was old to us, and he was just about to retire. He had never had women students before. He really wasn't quite ready to deal with us. He was good at being an advisor because he took it very seriously. He talked to the faculty to find out about us, so that when he talked to us, he could give us advice – only he got our advice mixed up! I remember I went to see him during my first semester of Sophomore year, and he sat me down and said, “Oh, you shouldn't take things too seriously.” And I was thinking, “What is he talking about?” [laughter]. I don't think I take things seriously. And Sandy had a way of – if she didn't do well on a quiz or something – she would get very upset. And, sometimes I did well and sometimes I didn't – although I generally did quite well and that's probably because I was well prepared. So, I had my meeting with him and I come back to the dorm and I'm thinking, “I don't know what the heck this is...” And, she comes back two hours later after her meeting with him, and she's crying. He told her that she's not taking things the way she should and she was disrupting some of the classes. She was going on and on. I looked at her and I said, “You know, I think he got us mixed up!” [laughter]. And so, that was something that we laugh about, but I don't think Sandy thought it was funny.

Poon: Did you ever tell him?

Burka: Well, not really. In our Introductory Chem E course, Max Dybert – his wife was a biologist, but he was very religious – informed both Sandy and me that as soon as he agreed to marry her, he told her that she was to stay at home and take care of the children because that's what women were supposed to do. I didn't necessarily think that this was the best type of advice a person who is teaching the Introductory Chem Eng course should be dispensing, but I didn't care too much. He was fair. But the funniest incident I ever had was at the end of one class, he said, "Could you please come see me after class. I need to talk to you." And I was thinking, "Oh Lord, what did I do now?" So he said to come to his office and we set up a time and so I went there taking all my quizzes there with me and all my problem sets to find out what I did wrong. And he sits me down and says, "I asked you to come here because I have a very serious problem." And I'm thinking, "Oh no..." and he looks at me and says, "My wife lost her wedding ring and I need to buy her a new one and I don't know anything about rings. Here is a catalogue for you to pick a wedding ring for my wife." [laughter].

Poon: That's ridiculous!

Burka: I just looked at him like he was out of his mind, but I looked at the catalogue and found a ring that I liked. About two weeks later, he said, "Wow, I gave it to her and she liked it."

Poon: I hope you got some extra points for that!

Burka: I just thought it was very amusing. But back then, those things were part of it. It was fun. It was a different era. Today, you can't do this and you can't do that. There are laws against everything, but back then, it was a simpler era.

Poon: Did expectations for women carry over into your life after school? You went to MIT, which is a phenomenal school, and later went on to Princeton. After your education, did people have certain expectations for you, such as marriage and family?

Burka: First of all, I got married as an undergrad. Back in those days, we did a lot more of that – marrying very young. I'm not sure that was the smartest thing I've ever done, but the marriage lasted, so it all worked out. I think that there were pressures. I don't think my in-laws were ever happy with my career. I went on to work for Industry before I went back to Princeton for my PhD. I was very lucky that there was an MIT Ph.D. grad who formed a company. His name was Ralph Landau. If you got to MIT, the Chem Eng building is called the Landau building. He had this company in New York. By then, the company was quite big. It was very successful. I think that he had 700 employees or some such. He was one of the first people who was willing to hire women. And that was unusual because I went on a lot of interviews with major chemical companies where I would walk in to the interview room at MIT, and they would take one look at me and say, "I'm not going to even interview you because I would never hire you." It was point blank. Their company would never hire a woman engineer. It was just the way it was. It took some time, but times changed. I remember that the Ford Motor Company sent a message to the Chem E Department, saying that they were looking for chemical engineers and to encourage their students to apply. So I sent my resume in and so did about six or seven of my classmates. I really was a pretty good student. I was near the top of the class. Well, all five of them were invited out to Ford for an interview, and I got a rejection from Ford by return mail. But times have changed since.

Poon: When you were hired and started working, did you feel that you were taken seriously?
Or were there still times where you weren't treated the same?

Burka: That was part of the problem. While the owners of the company were progressive, the immediate supervisors weren't. So, it was pretty unpleasant and that's why I went back to school to get my Ph.D. It was really ridiculous. This is an interesting thing: I was working as a Process Design Engineer – which means that I was working on a team that was designing a Chemical Plant – and typically, back in those days, in companies like Scientific Design, there were about six engineers for a certain plant and each of you did a section of a plant. And once, the design was ready, then it would be constructed and part of the team that designed it would go and oversee the construction of the plant. And this was a plant that we designed somewhere in Spain. Even though I was married, I always made it clear to my husband that such startup work was part of the job, and so we finished the plans and it came time for the startup. And, the five guys on the team were going on the startup and I was told that I wasn't going. It was understood that you couldn't be promoted unless you had done startups. I was 22 when I did this because I graduated younger, even with a Masters. The team leader was a guy who was 32, so he was not an old guy – single, but very full of himself. I went to see him and said, "I don't understand why five of them are going on the startup and I'm not." This is a direct quote. He said, "I can't send you because you, first of all, would destroy the whole startup to have you there." And I said, "Why?" He said, "If you are an engineer there, then you would have to deal with the operators. Dealing with the operators means that you would drink with the operators,

smoke with the operators and womanize with operators and you can't do any of those, Maria.”

Poon: Wow, I can't believe someone would say that to you in a professional setting and think that those were legitimate reasons!

Burka: They said it right to you. It didn't matter.

Poon: I think that it was amazing that you even confronted them about that. That is a big step right there.

Burka: So after that, I applied to graduate school. [laughter]. I said, “Okay, I have no future here.” So I went back to Princeton and got a Ph.D.

Poon: So what did you think of Princeton versus MIT?

Burka: Well, I was the first woman in the Chem E department so that was not good. I was the first woman accepted in the Ph.D. program at Princeton, and that was not necessarily a good move on my part. I was the first woman as a faculty member at Maryland, and I learned over the years, that it's not good to be the first one. You take a lot of the heat, and then, the second one comes along, everybody's busy falling over themselves trying to make them feel good.

Poon: Unfortunately, someone has to do that. How did you feel about being an Assistant Professor because you said that MIT, there were no female professors during your time? So, how did it feel to be on the other end?

Burka: It was very unpleasant – that's another reason why I left academia. It was very unpleasant.

Poon: Did you see a difference in your female students who looked up to you? I'm sure they saw you as a mentor.

Burka: I liked that I did have good relationships with my students, but my administration at the University of Maryland was so unpleasant and so uncaring. It was just not a good experience, and so that's why I left. I love teaching and I still keep up with some of my students. Maryland has had its ups and downs since then, but I think they are doing better now. It was very hard.

Poon: So, after you went to Princeton for your Ph.D. and you went back into the workforce, did you see a huge difference? Did people take you more seriously?

Burka: Well, no, but times had changed by then, and so there was a lot of pressure on Maryland. I started teaching in 1977, I think, so when I took some extra time because I had my two oldest children while in graduate school. My advisor died, so I finished a year later than I should have. And times were changing and the laws were changing. I had my third child as a young assistant professor at U. Maryland.

Poon: You said that you got married pretty early in your undergrad experience. Many professional women talk about the balance between working life and family life and all those pressures. Did you come up against any challenges along the way? Do you have any advice for young women who are breaking into the workforce today?

Burka: My advice is that there is no set form. My husband and I talk about this often, but every marriage has its own rules and its own ups and downs. I've been married for over 40 years, so you learn to compromise. You learn to give a little and take a little. You have to work it out between yourselves. It took a lot of back and forth. I don't really think that my husband - who was very supportive of my working - didn't really ever understand all the give and take that came along with that. His mother had never worked, and my father-in-law was a very rigid and very domineering person, he

thought, but in actual fact, my mother-in-law ran everything. He had this view of himself as macho man and he gave my mother-in-law an allowance, but basically, he was relatively successful, and she made sure it was more money than she could ever spend. She put it away for whatever she wanted. He didn't like the idea that I had control over my own life. My father-in-law has this vision that women needed to be kept under control. The fact that I had my own career and did my own thing just irked him.

Poon: Do you think that there are more or less challenges that women face today than when you broke into the workforce?

Poon: We were talking about this actually yesterday in a meeting. I am the President of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers. And yesterday, I was in a meeting and I was talking with Madeleine Jacobs who is the Executive Director of the American Chemical Society. I have a huge amount of respect for Madeline. And we were talking about the fact about what is happening to women and where they are in society. And I look at my daughters and their friends – my daughters are into their careers and not married – but what interests me are their friends who have gotten married. I thought they had fantastic careers, but as soon as they got married and had children, they quit. To me, this is astonishing. Now, a lot of them had mothers who never had careers. If you put in all that effort to go to the top schools and graduate degrees and you got this great career, and then the day your first baby is born, then you say that you're going to stay home. For my generation, that is an astonishing development. And, I worry about that. My mother always worked, but that's because she needed to. I came from that kind of family. Hungarian women were a little

different. I look at women of my generation who didn't work, and I felt that they put themselves in jeopardy because I saw too many of my contemporary women who didn't work, who would wake up one day to discover that their husbands had left them. In very dire circumstances, it is very hard to find a job and support children and fight for alimony payments and child support payments.

Poon: I would imagine that it would be difficult to start a new career in your late 40s or 50s.

Burka: Yes, and you have a husband who decided that he wants that younger trophy wife or whatever – which is unfortunately the case. And you find these women whose lives were destroyed. I look at my daughters and friends and say, “Do you know what you're putting yourself in for?” It certainly is not something I would stick my nose into, but I worry about that development for women of this generation.

Poon: I was talking to some alumnae about this, and men don't have to make that choice. Women who are in these high positions in their professions are always faced with these hard life decisions. Women are forced to make these choices. It's usually one or the other – it's hard to balance, and they would rather just make a radical decision. If we were talking about men and children, there wouldn't be question. He would always be expected to choose his career. It's definitely a challenge for women.

Burka: Right. It's interesting because for the women in my generation who continued with their careers, we sacrificed but we thought it was worth it. But of course, our children went to school with children whose mothers quit working the minute they found their husbands. A lot of them never finished school and didn't have a lot of skills. I see these women and I kind of look at them and go, “My God, do these young women really understand what it is that they are doing?” It worries me a bit about this

generation. I play tennis a lot. It is my entertainment. I play in a number of different groups and I'm astonished by the number of women my age who consider themselves very socially elite who got married very young and never worked because they considered it beneath them. I always worked. And then, they woke up one day and their husbands left them, and they can't afford to pay for the tennis court. They had to sell their homes because they could not afford the upkeep. They had to move into an apartment after they spent all this time fixing up a home. Because of the stresses of the situation, they became alienated from their children. And, I'm looking at some of them and I hear their stories, and I'd say I go on vacation, they get very resentful because they can't afford a vacation. They have the most horrendous jobs. There's this women who is a dog walker. There's nothing wrong with being a dog walker, but I'm saying is that's how she makes a living. It's a very meager living, and she lives in not a kind of space she's used to. It's a drastic lifestyle change. Her daughter doesn't speak to her because she took the father's side in the divorce. And I'm going, "This is not generally the case, it only happens rarely, but I've seen enough of it that it worries me about the women who were giving it all up."

Poon: I think in my generation, it is more normalized that women can have a career. My mother's generation, people went to school to find their husbands, so it was just implied that you were going to be a housewife. There's nothing wrong with that, but that would just expected. My generation has a lot more opportunities for women. I have hope that they will make those good life decisions and be able to balance work and family.

Burka: I have nothing against women who want to stay home with the children, but in my view, she's got to keep up. As I said, my best friend has never really worked. She's wonderful and everything is great. She's got children and has a good relationship, so if it works out, it's great. But I'm just saying that there are downsides to being a stay at home woman. The other thing is that the laws have changed. Back in my generation, if your husband left you and you had children, there was alimony and child support. A lot of that is not there anymore. It's assumed that the women are going to go out and find a job. If you have no skills and you have stayed at home for 15 years, you can't go back to work, especially in something like the sciences. You can try to retrain. Here at NSF (National Science Foundation), we have all these programs to retrain. It's just very frustrating for these poor women. So that worries me. I don't have any answers. I'm not a social psychologist. [laughter]. I have no idea, but it's something that I worry about. It is a bit easier in the non-sciences to go back. It's easier in some other fields to go back into the work force once your children have grown.

Poon: So let's talk a bit about your career. Tell me what the main focus of your career is right now?

Burka: I've done this job for 25 years. It's been great fun. I'm a research administrator. I've really enjoyed it. I love working with people. I like that I can influence the course of research by the funding decisions that I make. I have a very good relationship with the community. I feel very happy as a Chemical Engineer, but I'm coming to the end of my career. I've enjoyed being AIChE President. It was, to me, a huge honor that I got nominated, and I feel good that I got elected. I feel that I'm doing a lot of volunteer

work for my community – it is something that I do Saturdays and Sundays. So, I'm kind of winding it down. Next year, I'm going on sabbatical and go back to Maryland and refresh. I've done that at times – you need to keep up. And then, I'll come here for a number of years and then, retire. I think at some point, you have to realize that you've done your bit, and I don't know what I'll do then – maybe something completely different!

Poon: I did some research and you said in an interview about how Chemical Engineering is becoming a more global profession.

Burka: That has been my focus at AICE. Chemical companies are not building in this country because of environmental laws and labor costs, so chemical industries are moving to Asia. This has been a tremendous shift for chemical engineers. We need to prepare our workforce to work in other countries. We need to have an infrastructure for young workers who are now working in foreign countries and need to learn the languages and the culture. It is very important that we get used to that. We have to face reality and it's a very changing environment. Chemical companies themselves are actually focusing on hiring local workers, and sometimes bringing them here. It is a global economy. As an institution, AIChE needs to be more involved in that. From many points of view so that we don't have an incidence like Bhopal – which was a chemical plant that had an explosion and many people were killed. We need to focus on global safety and safety training. These are the kinds of things that I feel are very important for our profession right now. I think in the past 10 years, I could count on one hand how many plants were built in this country, and so we have to adjust to that. We got major chemical companies who now hold their Director meetings in Asia. I was

talking to a gentleman from Shell who says that they now have their Board of Directors meetings in Shanghai. One of the things I've always felt is that no profession, no organization, or no person can continue to be effective unless they change, keep up with the times and look towards the future. If you don't do that, then you are basically going to lose. You need to constantly be looking towards the future. If you don't, then you will not survive. It's not always easy. It's not always pleasant or something that people are typically comfortable with. Change is very difficult, especially after a certain age when you get used to your own ways. We have serious unemployment in this country. Chem Engineers are doing well in that respect. The general unemployment in this field is lower than for the general public. It is a good profession. Globalization is our reality.

Poon: Let's reflect a bit about MIT. Do you ever go back and visit? Have you been there since your graduation?

Burka: I go back for my job all the time. I give a grant and I visit the professors.

Poon: Do you think a lot has changed?

Burka: Oh, yes, totally different.

Poon: I'm sure when you walk around campus and you've seen that it's 60% men and 40% women – which is very different than your time there.

Burka: I don't really notice that. MIT has been particularly good with keeping up with the times. It is a very agile university. It is very admirable that they are always two steps ahead, and I really admire it for that.

Poon: That's what makes it MIT.

Burka: They are very entrepreneurial. They always encourage their students to start their own companies. It is just a great place. I went back for this thing for women who graduated around the time that I did. It kind of left me flat. I'm just not a looking-back-kind-of-person. Some people are. My husband loves it and goes to all the reunions. I honestly do think that this is the one area where MIT is not good. My husband and all my kids went to Ivy League schools, and they all do it very well. MIT doesn't reach out to their alumni. They don't make you feel all fuzzy about going back and reminiscing. My daughter who went to Princeton went back to her reunion got a jacket and went to parties. I go back to MIT and it's boring. I also don't think that the MIT Alumni Magazine is any good. It's like another science magazine – I do that for my job! I look at my husband's alumni magazine; they do this great job about what's happening on campus and what's fun. You don't get that from MIT. It's too much like my job. I want to know what kids and professors are doing. I find that I get Technology Review and I flip through and look at my class page and throw it away.

Poon: Oh no, that's too bad! Where did your daughters go for undergrad? I was wondering if you encouraged them to go to MIT.

Burka: I did! It's actually a funny story. I took my older daughter who ended up going to Princeton to see schools. She wanted to be a Chemistry Major. She refused to even consider MIT. We went to visit Harvard, and I said, "Look, we are already at Harvard. Let's just drive down the street and look at MIT." I still remember the line that she said, "You're welcome to drive down the street, Mom, but I'm going to close my eyes!" [laughter]. They wouldn't even consider it – none of my daughters!

Poon: What did they end up studying?

Burka: She started out as a Chemistry Major, and she switched to Economics and ultimately went to Business School and now, she's on Wall Street. My son went to Penn and started out Pre-med, and he pretty much stuck with that, but then switched to more of the business side, and then ended up also on Wall Street doing Healthcare Management. My youngest daughter went to Dartmouth. She was a Mechanical Engineer for the first two years, and then just got turned off from engineering because it was a five year program. She switched to Economics and she is now a lawyer. I started them in the right direction, and they went their own ways. [laughter]. I told them that I loved MIT and it was a great experience, but I couldn't sell it to them. Children do their own thing and you ultimately want them to be happy.

Poon: Yes, you are a good mother.

Burka: But, I do think that MIT is good for some people. I love getting my Princeton Alumni Magazine, and I read it cover to cover. It's great. They talk about professors and their lives and their studies, and it makes it all sound so interesting. They talk about the students and what they are doing and their activities. You have to look with a microscope in the MIT magazine!

Poon: That is kind of bizarre because MIT is so exciting. All the recent grads are going on to start their own startups.

Burka: It is presented to me in a really boring way. It doesn't have that excitement and fun – maybe it's just me.

Poon: I'll make a note of it and see what I can do. [laughter].

Burka: Right! [laughter].

Poon: That's

Burka: I think that I was very lucky. I had a great four years, but there were times where it was challenging. But I look back on it and I had wonderful professors. It was a great place. My husband often says that youth is wasted on the young. College is wasted on college students.

Poon: I'm sure there's a lot of truth in that!

Burka: If I were doing it today, it'd just be so different and I would appreciate it a lot more. It's a multifaceted place. It's got wonderful faculty. I think it is important to be the right kind of student. You will not be spoon fed things. If that is what you want, you will not have a good time. You have to be a self-starter. There's a reason why it has such a great reputation. And I do thank them (MIT) – they are very much the reason why I have such a great career.

Poon: Well, you're such an asset to the school's reputation.

Burka: We had a good time, and not so good times. I don't want to sugar-coat it, but there were some of my classmates that didn't have such a good time. I do remember times shedding a tear or two when things didn't go the way I wanted it to.

Poon: It's character building.

Burka: Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. They got most of it right.

Poon: Thank you so much for talking with me today!

Burka: Thank you!

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