Landmark West!

Oral History Interviews on San Juan Hill

Interview with Roberta Schlefer Semer	Time: 01:34:06
Conducted by Fanny Julissa García	1 Audio File
May 30th, 2024	1 Zoom Video

Bio: Roberta Schlefer Semer was born in San Francisco and grew up in the Upper West Side in New York City. Her family lived near the San Juan Hill neighborhood before it was razed during urban renewal efforts and the building of the Lincoln Center. She lived in the neighborhood from age 2 to about 10 years old roughly between 1942 to 1952. She moved to New Jersey after she married, raised her children in Westchester and returned back to the same community where she grew up in the Upper West Side after her children went off to college. She has now lived in Lincoln Towers for 36 years and has been an active member of the community. She served as chair of Community Board 7 which encompasses the neighborhoods of Manhattan Valley, Upper West Side, and Lincoln Square in the borough of Manhattan. As a member of the community board, she was actively involved in the opposition to the development of Riverside South. Roberta currently serves on the board of Landmark West as a Vice Chair for the organization.

Full Interview Transcription

[00:00:03] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay. My name is Fanny Julissa Garcia. Today is Thursday, May 30th, 2024. I'm an oral historian doing interviews for Landmark West about the San Juan Hill neighborhood. And today I'm meeting with Roberta, and I am interviewing her about her life experiences and memories about San Juan Hill. So, Roberta, please kick us off by saying your full name and giving yourself a brief introduction.

[00:00:38] **Roberta Semer:** I am Roberta Schlefer Semer. I was born in San Francisco. My parents. My father had a job in the South. We ended up in New York City and he discovered that he no longer had a job. And he. We stayed in a hotel on the Upper West Side where you could make your own meals for a longer term, I guess, type of hotel. And he managed to get a job. His money was running out just to get a job working for 20th Century Fox, which was also located not too far from San Juan Hill. I believe on 56th Street or 55th or 56th Street and the West Side. And we moved to West 69th Street, and I lived here until the end of fifth grade. And then we moved to Westchester and I was raised. I went to college, I got married, I lived all over the country. I ended up as a single mom living in Westchester. When my kids were in college, I moved back to the West Side. So I've been here almost 36 years.

[00:01:52] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. Do you remember what job your dad was promised?

[00:01:58] **Roberta Semer:** My dad was working in the film business, he was working for Samuel Goldwyn. He was wrapping, going to sing all his reps in the in the South. So we were living in, in Florida when I thought it was traveling around the South. And we got back, and it was six months, then we were supposed to come back to New York, and we got back to New York, and he said, "No job." Didn't need him anymore. So my dad got a job. It was during the war. He got a job at 20th Century Fox. Head of advertising and Marketing of what was then called. Exploitation. The term you've never used today.

[00:02:56] **Fanny Julissa García:** What? Why was it called that?

[00:02:59] **Roberta Semer:** It wasn't pejorative.

[00:03:03] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:03:04] **Roberta Semer:** You know how words change.

[00:03:06] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yes.

[00:03:07] **Roberta Semer:** And he couldn't get into the Army because he had a physical defect. And so he was very, very impressed with war bonds. And so he did, you know, every during the war, people went to the movie theaters to relax, enjoy life. But they also got to see a cartoon. They got to see a newsreel. They got to see coming attractions. And sometimes they got to see two features. And they also were solicited to buy U.S. savings bonds, and very often movie stars, when they came to a city, would do rallies for, selling U.S. savings bonds.

[00:03:52] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. During that time. This was World War II?

[00:03:57] **Roberta Semer:** Yeah.

[00:03:58] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay. And during that time when you managed to stay in, in the city, or your father managed to stay, even though he had not gotten the job that he was coming here for. What? Where did you? Where was the hotel where you stayed?

[00:04:17] **Roberta Semer:** I don't remember. I was two years old.

[00:04:20] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah. Roberta, can you tell me a little bit about your family background? Like, where is your family? Your ancestors.

[00:04:32] **Roberta Semer:** Both my parents were born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. My paternal grandparents moved here. Moved to the United States around 1900. My maternal grandparents came in the 1840s or 50s. And my parents got married in Omaha and moved to San Francisco because my father got a job with the United Artists in San Francisco. And they lived there, from 1935 through to right after the bombing and our entry into the war.

[00:05:14] **Fanny Julissa García:** From? What part of the world did your family come from?

[00:05:16] **Roberta Semer:** They came from Russia. From probably what is now Ukraine, from the Steppes. And the story about my great-grandfather on my father's side is that he had a store in Ukraine, and he had money, and he was married. He had my grandmother, my great-grandmother, who died right after my grandfather was born. And he remarried and had a new family. And my grandfather was sent off when he was 13 or 14 to care for himself. But my great-grandfather, Philip. So there are two stories. One is that he came to America because one of his best friends came first, and we went to Philadelphia, and the best friend wasn't there. And so then he went city to city trying to find his best friend. And finally, he got to Omaha. And the friend had married an Indian woman and gone off. But people told him he should settle there. The other story is that he had taken the passage to Philadelphia because he knew some people there. And when they was in Philadelphia, they said, "You know, there really are many opportunities for you, but there would be in Omaha." So it's your choice which story you want to believe.

[00:06:46] **Fanny Julissa García:** I love that there are two versions of this story.

[00:06:50] **Roberta Semer:** My great-grandfather did bring everybody else he brought. His wife and children, and those whose youngest child was born in the States. He then brought my grandfather over, and then my grandfather brought his wife and he had three children in Ukraine and had three more children in the States.

[00:07:12] **Fanny Julissa García:** What kind of industry did your grandfather end up working in?

[00:07:16] **Roberta Semer:** My grandfather was a scholar and was never very good in business. And never made very much money. So in 1934, the year my parents married, my oldest uncle bought them a house, and bought my grandparents a house. They had been running a boarding house in the horrible part of South Omaha, near the stockyards. So my uncle is Izzy, he bought them a house near where my grandmother's sister lived, and my parents furnished it. And my oldest uncle and my father supported them until the day it died. So it's sort of a reverse rags-to-riches story. The children became successful and helped them.

[00:08:06] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah.

[00:08:07] **Roberta Semer:** But the ending was nice because they lived into their late 80s, maybe early 90s.

[00:08:16] **Fanny Julissa García:** And, do you remember what year it was that your father brought the family over to New York City from San Francisco?

[00:08:27] **Roberta Semer:** I believe I was 18 months, so I was born at the end of 1940. So it probably was the end of 42.

[00:08:40] **Fanny Julissa García:** And you were two years old at that time you said.

[00:08:42] **Roberta Semer:** Two and a half, yes.

[00:08:44] **Fanny Julissa García:** Two and a half, and you had other siblings?

[00:08:47] **Roberta Semer:** I had an older sister.

[00:08:49] **Fanny Julissa García:** Only two sisters?

[00:08:52] **Roberta Semer:** Only the two of us.

[00:08:52] **Fanny Julissa García:** And mom and dad. I love that. What were your parents' names? And your sister?

[00:09:00] **Roberta Semer:** Evelyn and Charles. And my sister was Arlene. And my mother was not working at the time, so she would take us. We went to the library at least once a week, and the library was a block of the public school, which was on Amsterdam. And I believe the library is still—the building of the library still there. It's 69th Street and Amsterdam, and I believe the public school was on 68th. Although it's long gone. It was torn down when those buildings were torn down. The library was preserved. So it could not be torn down. So when Lincoln Towers got all that property, they were able to tear everything; all the tenements down but they weren't able to tear the library down.

[00:09:52] **Fanny Julissa García:** I like that. I like that they weren't able to tear down the library.

[00:09:57] **Roberta Semer:** The library eventually sold their building, which is historical, and moved to a high rise building in the 60s, between 67th and 66th Street. Which is, they have the lower floor. There's a fire department on one side. They have the lower floor on the other side.

[00:10:17] **Fanny Julissa García:** What is the library building now? Do you know?

[00:10:20] **Roberta Semer:** It's a synagogue.

[00:10:22] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay. That's good.

[00:10:24] **Roberta Semer:** Yeah. So it's still pretty open if you wanted to go and see it.

[00:10:29] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah.

[00:10:31] **Roberta Semer:** And it's two stories high, but the other buildings were more than 4 or 5 stories in the neighborhood.

[00:10:40] **Fanny Julissa García:** So then Roberta talk to me about how old you were when you lived in this area—from two years old to when?

[00:10:49] **Roberta Semer:** To the end of fifth grade, so I would have been ten.

[00:10:54] **Fanny Julissa García:** And what do you remember about that time?

[00:10:57] **Roberta Semer:** Well, I remember the library. I remember the public school because my sister, of course, went there before me. And I remember that the principal loved screaming at children. And my mother was very involved with the PTA. When I was in kindergarten, the kids would all line up. There's a big room and we'd all line up with your classes and the teacher—the principal who was fairly small, would stand on a little step stool, and she'd start screaming and her face would get red. And I would tell the other kindergarten kids that it was okay because she was never mean to kindergarten kids. And I remember being very, very frustrated because I didn't think I was learning very much.

And at the end of second grade my sister graduated and so she moved to Joan of Arc Middle School. And at that point we were rezoned so you could go to a different public school. And so my mother immediately transferred me to a different school. And I knew immediately it was a much better school. Which is amazing when you think of a third grader knowing that they're in a better school. It bothers me. You know, I'm on the community board, so it bothers me now that we have under-performing schools in our district. And I know people get very annoyed because I'll go to meetings and I'll say, "It's just unconscionable that there should be an underperforming school."

[00:12:36] **Fanny Julissa García:** You're really passionate about education?

[00:12:38] **Roberta Semer:** Yes. So there are two public schools near me. One is PS 199, one is PS 191. And they were supposed to be integrated so that all the children would go to one school for three years and then the other school for three years. And then just before that happened, it got changed. So that we were zoned for a particular school, and you went for the whole time, which meant that the Amsterdam Houses kids were basically in a different school. And what I have to say is that in the last five years, they have a new principal there. She's totally turning that school around. It's now a state of the art school.

[00:13:24] **Fanny Julissa García:** I like that.

[00:13:25] **Roberta Semer:** And when Riverside Center got built we got the first building Certificate of Occupancy (CofO) to have a public school. And it had to be fully built. So that school is now where PS 91 is and it was built by a star architect. So it wasn't turned over to the Department of Education until it was. I mean, it wasn't fitted up inside. But the walls and everything were built. So you have lots of light, you have great big staircases. You have elevators that work. You have. You know, all sorts and a principal, who has really worked hard to make sure that her teachers got all the support they needed. There were enough guidance counselors, you know, with enough support staff.

[00:14:17] **Fanny Julissa García:** What made.

[00:14:18] **Roberta Semer:** So you can turn something around. But but it was based on my memories as a little child of having school that wasn't meeting the needs of the children to a school that really was.

[00:14:38] **Fanny Julissa García:** What made you so passionate about education and learning?

[00:14:46] **Roberta Semer:** I think my mother took us to the library and read to us from the time we were very little. And then we'd discuss things. And the community was changing because by the time I was in third or fourth grade there were a lot more Hispanic, Latino, this South American, Puerto Rican in the neighborhood where there hadn't been there earlier. And I think in fourth and fifth grade we became aware of gangs which we have not been aware up until then.

[00:15:23] **Fanny Julissa García:** You became aware of what?

[00:15:25] **Roberta Semer:** That there were gangs, kids and gangs.

[00:15:27] **Fanny Julissa García:** Oh I see. Wow. Around 5 or 5 or six.

[00:15:33] **Roberta Semer:** So I would say that would be 1947, 48. Maybe 48, 49.

[00:15:41] **Fanny Julissa García:** When we spoke before you, you had a really vivid memory of an exchange at school with a young immigrant student.

[00:15:51] **Roberta Semer:** Oh, yeah. So when I was in fifth grade, there were some Puerto Rican and some South American children in my class. The teacher was not especially nice to them. She wasn't mean, but she wasn't. She didn't talk to them the same way she talked to the other children. And one of the girls went home and told her father. And her father worked for the UN—it was just starting, and she went home and told her father and her father was a diplomat from I don't remember which country. And they all had thick accents because English was their second language. And he went in, he had a literally, I remember him coming in, and I remember having a long discussion with the teacher, and her whole attitude changed after that.

[00:16:44] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you remember what he looked like and what the student looked like?

[00:16:49] **Roberta Semer:** She looked like one of us. You know, if I hadn't heard her talk, I wouldn't have known that she wasn't, you know, an American kid. And he was very dignified. You know, he looked like, you know, could've been my father. It was, you know, the suit, the tie, the whole. You know the whole business outfit. But the whole point was that. Just because you don't speak clearly doesn't mean that you're not smart. You're not capable of learning. And my mother was very active in the Public Education Association. So. And the principal was very supportive. Mr. Mandel was. People whose children went there, too. He must have been there like 20 years or more, and people would remember him and talk about how wonderful he was.

[00:17:50] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you know how it is that you became aware about gangs at school?

[00:17:55] **Roberta Semer:** I don't know—a couple of kids in my building were very upset. So we, you know, we would all play. One of the nice things about that period of New York is there would be cars on our street parked along the side of the street that never moved or rarely moved, and they would rarely be cars coming down the street. So we'd all go down and play on the street if the weather was nice, and if a car was coming, they would drive slowly enough or stop, and we'd all take our stuff off the street and go up on the sidewalk. And so there were a lot of, you know, there were kids from my there weren't that many buildings on my street that had kids, but there were 3 or 4 buildings and we'd all play together. So at some point a couple of boys must have had a run in with somebody.

[00:18:43] **Fanny Julissa García:** You could play in the street at that point.

[00:18:45] **Roberta Semer:** Oh, you definitely could. You would not let a child play in the street, and our moms could look out the window and call us in, which you'd never be allowed to do today. And I remember walking to school with my sister when I probably was—by the time I was in first or second grade. There were all these tenements around. And my sister, if we had a little bit of money, we'd stop at the candy. A little bit of money, a penny. We'd stop at the penny candy store and buy. I mean, you could buy a handful of candy for a penny. If you had a nickel, you got change back. And my sister would. Well my sister was not always very nice to me, you know, being an older sister. But if I came out of

the candy store, she'd check to see if I had the right number. She looked to see what candy I had and checked to see that I had the right amount of change.

[00:19:47] **Fanny Julissa García:** You remember what kind of candy you bought?

[00:19:50] **Roberta Semer:** It was like little paper strips with little dots of candy on it, and probably a little candy corn and maybe a lollipop.

[00:19:59] **Fanny Julissa García:** Was there any ice cream in the neighborhood?

[00:20:03] **Roberta Semer:** No, I think ice cream was—this was just a tenement building with a little store on the side street. So ice cream would have been either in a truck or on the main street.

[00:20:17] **Fanny Julissa García:** You remember what you played in the street with friends.

[00:20:20] **Roberta Semer:** We played kickball. We played, you know, we bounced the ball and put our leg over it. We'd jump rope and then we had some funny games where you throw a ball and run. I have no idea what that was. It's funny, when I moved to Westchester. Nobody played this. They played real, the kind of games, you'd know about. But we had all these crazy little street games.

[00:20:49] **Fanny Julissa García:** That you made up?

[00:20:51] **Roberta Semer:** I think they were, you know, I mean, I think we could go online and find them. I think they were more universal for city kids.

[00:21:00] **Fanny Julissa García:** Got it.

[00:21:01] **Roberta Semer:** Where, you know, kids that had access would play softball. Or running races or tag. And you can hide behind a tree. But, you know, you couldn't really hide anywhere. You know so you were limited to the kinds of games you could play.

[00:21:23] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah.

[00:21:26] **Roberta Semer:** And there probably is. You know, we could really figure out what they were.

[00:21:32] **Fanny Julissa García:** How safe did you feel in your neighborhood?

[00:21:34] **Roberta Semer:** I felt very safe. Until I was a little bit older. But also, you know, when I was little I was always with somebody. I wasn't allowed to go to Central Park alone. So I can only go with somebody's mom or, you know, another adult. And I do remember I wrote a poem. I called it "The Lemon." So when I was old enough my mother would be making dinner. And she would need a lemon because she'd forgotten to buy a lemon. And she'd sent me down to—we lived in an apartment building next to another apartment building. And they were all brownstones after that. All the way down to the corner. There were what today is politically incorrect. But we called them bums. Who probably were you know, there were SRO type buildings and some of them would be sitting out on the street, you know, half drunk. And I'd be terrified till I got to Columbus Avenue. And when I got to Columbus Avenue I felt totally safe.

[00:22:53] **Roberta Semer:** And I'd go into the store and if I didn't have the right amount of money, they knew me. They knew my mother. They would say, "You know, make a note. She can pay us more tomorrow." And then I'd have to go back home. And so I'd be running to get back home. I was perfectly safe. I don't think. You know, there were enough people. There were enough eyes on the street that nothing would have happened to me. But you know, when you're 8 or 9 you don't realize that. You know, I was old enough to go to the store, but not, oh, you know, if I were 10 or 11, I would have known that I was safe. But I was, like, young enough to not know. But the storekeepers knew everybody. And, you know, if you'd forgotten your wallet, you would come back the next day. Something which she could never do today.

[00:23:53] **Roberta Semer:** I remember when World War II ended. Everybody was. So I don't remember when the war ended in Japan but it ended in Europe, people threw—tore up magazines and stuff, and threw confetti out the windows. My parents and my sister walked up to Central Park, but they wouldn't let me go because they thought I was too little. And then there were a whole bunch of, probably within a few months, there were a whole bunch of GI's and sailors in New York in uniforms. And, one of the sailors wanted to give me a—we were in a drugstore, far from school once. I reminded him of his niece or you know a child, a family member back where he lived. And he wanted to give me a little plush toy. And my mother told me I couldn't have it because he needed to bring it to—I had plenty, and he needed to bring it to his niece. But it was so sweet. No, I appreciated it. I was young enough to want it, but old enough to understand that some other little girl needed it.

[00:25:11] **Fanny Julissa García:** Right? Roberta, what's the age difference between you and your sister?

[00:25:17] **Roberta Semer:** Three years.

[00:25:18] **Fanny Julissa García:** Three years. So you weren't that much younger but she took on the the older sister role?

[00:25:25] **Roberta Semer:** Oh, yeah, that was her personality. That is her personality. We also, I remember, we had rations.

[00:25:44] **Fanny Julissa García:** Rations, right.

[00:25:46] **Roberta Semer:** And we had ration cards for different things, so they were different cards. So my sister and I would outgrow our shoes. And so my mother would have to take us to the ration board. And so, you know, we put our foot up to show them that there was a hole in the shoe or that the other foot was too long for this, you know, whatever it was. And they give us a new ration card.

[00:26:14] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow.

[00:26:15] **Roberta Semer:** And you had rations for meat. You had rations for fruits and vegetables. Food rations for everything. And we have blackout shades.

[00:26:25] **Fanny Julissa García:** Why blackout shades?

[00:26:27] **Roberta Semer:** Because they were afraid the Germans would come and bomb us. So everybody had black out shades.

[00:26:38] **Fanny Julissa García:** Did you also have bomb shelters?

[00:26:41] **Roberta Semer:** That was when I was older, when I was out of the city. No, I don't think we were worried about being bombed. We were worried about airplanes.

[00:26:55] **Fanny Julissa García:** About airplanes doing what? Oh, like. Oh, dropping a bomb into the city?

[00:27:01] **Roberta Semer:** Well, if they could see us, right?

[00:27:03] **Fanny Julissa García:** Right, right.

[00:27:04] **Roberta Semer:** I mean, there was no way that was happening. There were a lot of silly things that happened that just weren't, you know, made no sense. And I wasn't scared. That that didn't, we weren't, you know, our parents, our parents might have been, but they certainly weren't going to, you know, the children weren't scared. I don't remember—I made, during the 50s when there was a bomb. You know, there was talk about bombs and kids had to duck and cover. Actually, when I lived in the city, we did have to duck and cover. That's right. After the war. You're right. At our school, we had oilcloths. We had, like, a yard of, yard by yard, square of oilcloth. And we were supposed to pull it over our heads and hide under the desks. And we weren't afraid of being bombed. But we thought it was pretty stupid. That we'd be under a desk. In sixth grade, when I was at a different school, we'd go down to the basement and I think this is really stupid. If the bricks of the building started falling in, we're never getting out of the basement. But we knew the oilcloth was not going to protect us from a hydrogen bomb.

[00:28:25] **Fanny Julissa García:** It was an oil cloth. What did that look like?

[00:28:28] **Roberta Semer:** It's like, have you ever seen the yellow raincoats? Sort of like, you know, not a sturdy material, but sort of like that. And it probably wasn't that expensive. You know you could go into a fabric store and buy it. It wasn't fabulously expensive. So, you know, it was probably a cheaper, you know, like cotton would have been more expensive because it would have been a finer cloth. This would have been a less refined cloth. Crazy.

[00:29:00] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah, it does seem kind of strange that something like that could be thought of as protective.

[00:29:09] **Roberta Semer:** Right? And you were supposed to, you know, crouch into a ball. And, you know, the desks were little. We weren't that big. But, you know, fourth and fifth grade, some of these kids were pretty, were much. You know, I was one of the smaller ones. So you know some of the kids were probably very uncomfortable under their desks.

[00:29:35] **Fanny Julissa García:** But how old were you when this was happening?

[00:29:39] **Roberta Semer:** So I was probably eight and nine.

[00:29:43] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay. This was towards the tail end of the war?

[00:29:50] **Roberta Semer:** No, it was after the war. This was after we bombed. This was after we bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And we were worried that Russia. This was during the Cold War, probably 47, 48, 49. We were afraid of the Russians. You know they would come and bombs us. When we moved to Westchester, my father was a warden, and he taught the class. There was a group of men in the community, and they were. They all had hard hats and flashlights. And they were going to go around the neighborhood and protect everybody. The only thing they did that was good is they knew who was in which house. So they couldn't have seen if people were okay, but you know had a bomb come it would have been a disaster.

[00:30:50] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah, definitely.

[00:30:55] **Roberta Semer:** And then if you lived in a tenement. I mean, I lived in a building with an elevator, and the elevator often went out, and so we were on the fifth floor, and I could walk. I could walk up the four flights. Some people took the elevator in the other building and crossed over the roof and then walked down the five flights. But, if you were in a tenement with no elevator. And not a lot of air and light. I imagine it would have been much more afraid of this kind of thing. Ironically, I'm now living where there were tenements. So Lincoln Towers was part of urban renewal was after San Juan Hill was around the same time. It was around the same time that Lincoln Center was built. It was all the Robert Moses kind of thing. And a few of the buildings that—there are eight Lincoln Tower buildings, and a few of them were built first. And they were that were all built over tenements, so all the tenements were knocked down. All the people in them were displaced. A few went to Amsterdam Houses. The rest just dispersed all over the place. And after I moved in, so I was here in the early 90s. We had to redo some of our driveways. We have circular driveways in front of the buildings or long driveways in front of some of them. They were caving in because they were built on top of basements. The basement hadn't been filled in.

[00:32:42] **Fanny Julissa García:** Let's stay in this moment in time. Can you remind me again what the cross streets were of the building where you lived?

[00:32:51] **Roberta Semer:** So the building where I live was 69th Street, and I was going up between Columbus and Central Park West.

[00:33:01] **Fanny Julissa García:** Please describe for me what the building look like. Is it still there?

[00:33:06] **Roberta Semer:** It is. 24 West 69th Street. It's still there. It looks just like. I think it has a slightly different cover in the front, but it looks just like it did when I was growing up.

[00:33:17] **Fanny Julissa García:** Describe for me what it looked like at the time that you were there and growing up.

[00:33:22] **Roberta Semer:** It was just a, you know, a normal ten story apartment building. Not that wide, with a sister building next door. Functional lobby, but not, you know, not a comfortable lobby. A place you could just walk in and our apartment had a little foyer in the front and then a living room. As you entered through the door to where there was a dining area and a kitchen, and then there were two bedrooms that faced —So the living room and the two bedrooms faced the front.

[00:34:06] **Fanny Julissa García:** The front of the street?

[00:34:08] **Roberta Semer:** The front of South 69th Street. So we looked, we faced. We looked north. We were on the south side of the street.

[00:34:16] **Fanny Julissa García:** And what was your view?

[00:34:18] **Roberta Semer:** Our view was an urban street. We could see the sidewalk. We could see the street. We could see the buildings across from us.

[00:34:29] **Fanny Julissa García:** And tell me

[00:34:30] **Roberta Semer:** And some of those brownstones now have been repaired, so many of them were in disrepair during that period. And so changes is amazing with the building. This street has not changed. The street looks exactly like it did then. It's just that some buildings have been spruced up a little better or cleaned up a little better. But you know, if. If you hadn't seen the street since 1949 and you came back, you would know it was the same street. Where many streets in New York you would go, "This isn't my street."

[00:35:06] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah. And what was your relationship or your connection to the San Juan Hill neighborhood?

[00:35:15] **Roberta Semer:** Well, the school was near there, and my father would probably walk past there on his way to work because he would mostly walk to work because the public transportation would not have got, you know. Maybe in real inclement weather, he might have taken a bus in the morning. And we went to school with kids from San Juan Hill. But we didn't know. We didn't know San Juan Hill. It was just, you know, the neighborhood.

[00:35:48] **Fanny Julissa García:** It wasn't called that at the time or you never heard it called that.

[00:35:52] **Roberta Semer:** If it was, I didn't hear it.

[00:35:54] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah.

[00:35:55] **Roberta Semer:** And my mother, Ronnie Eldridge, who's since become our city council rep and now retired, her mother and my mother and a few other people have a committee that they went around and they were trying to preserve and maintain the neighborhood. And so I think I told you before that they saved several churches.

[00:36:16] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yes. Right. They worked on saving churches.

[00:36:20] **Roberta Semer:** They worked on that. Developers wanted to, you know, buy the property and tear the church down. And they worked tirelessly to preserve.

[00:36:35] **Fanny Julissa García:** What activism do you remember happening.

[00:36:38] **Roberta Semer:** What I remember is after the fact the minister's son who had grown up. We were at some event and my mother...This man was very tall, nice looking, black man comes up to my mother, gives her a big hug and a kiss. And my mother looks at him and she had no clue who he was because when she last saw him he was up to here

on her [GESTURES HEIGHT DIFFERENCE]. He was like to here. And he said "I'm…" you know whatever his name is. and she's like [OPENS MOUTH IN AWE]. You know, his father was the pastor at the church. And he, of course, remembered her. And figured she would remember him, but he went from being a kid to being a grown man and then a very fine musician. So, that was just great.

[00:37:30] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah. Did you guys attend a church?

[00:37:34] **Roberta Semer:** No. No.

[00:37:36] **Fanny Julissa García:** Why did you practice any religion in the neighborhood?

[00:37:40] **Roberta Semer:** At one point, my mother decided to send my sister. My parents were Jewish. At some point, they decided to send us to Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, which was on 67th Street and Stephen Wise was still alive. He was the rabbi there. I think it's an apocryphal story, but the story is that my sister, who's three years older, was sitting in the auditorium and Stephen Wise was talking, and she decided that he was God, and she got scared and ran home. I think my mother didn't like getting up early on Sunday morning to take us to religious school. But we'll never know.

[00:38:37] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. So interesting. So, you know, you never went back or went to synagogue.

[00:38:47] **Roberta Semer:** No. No, not. Not then. I did when I was older. So. My mother was friendly with Stephen Wise and he was also friends. Rabbi David de Sola Pool with the rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, which is on 70th street. And my sister would come, the school and the kids in a class were either—there was some Orthodox Jewish kids. There were a lot of Catholic kids. So my sister would come home and she knew she couldn't get away with the Catholic holidays. So my sister would come home and say, "tomorrow is such and such holiday." And my mother would consult with the Rabbi. And he would say, " No, it is a holiday but you know, you can fast. You can go to school." So my mother would say, "Too bad you can't stay home." Where the orthodox girls got to stay home because who knows why.

[00:39:50] **Fanny Julissa García:** Roberta, tell me again about. Do you remember conversations or news about urban renewal and the change that was happening in the neighborhood?

[00:40:02] **Roberta Semer:** No, not until not until early 60s. What if my parents were back in New York in '62. And we knew Lincoln Center was a big deal. You know, in the 40s, the U.N. was a big deal. But that was derelict—that was mostly derelict land along the East River. It wasn't, you know, there might have been some buildings there, but if they were, they probably more factory type buildings than tenements. It was very you know, my parents were very traumatized that those buildings in the 60s were being torn down. You know, because it was an enclave that had a lot of musicians, a lot of artists, a lot of. Some of them did get to move to Amsterdam Houses, but many of them didn't. And the Amsterdam Houses was actually built earlier then. I think it was in the 50s, right? So there would have been a disconnect. You know, it's a major problem. We have the problem today that some of Amsterdam Houses might get torn to built the high rises. You know so we're not taking good care of—Displacing people is not a good thing. And you know, when you're. I was young enough that I didn't understand a lot of things. And my mother probably wouldn't have wanted to upset us. You know, you're displaced from the local

stores where you shop, where the shopkeepers know you, you're displaced from the local schools, where the teachers have a sense of who you are and watch out for you. And if they're older people, it's even harder. You know.

[00:42:28] **Fanny Julissa García:** How old were you in the 60s?

[00:42:32] **Roberta Semer:** I turned 20 in 1960.

[00:42:35] **Fanny Julissa García:** And your parents, how old would they have been?

[00:42:39] **Roberta Semer:** They were in their, my mother was around, was 24 when she had me so they would have been in their 40s, late 40s. But at that point they were living in a different place. They were involved in things, but in other things, I know that they didn't move back to the West Side. They moved back to the East Side. And my father was very involved in his business, and my mother was very involved in his business. So they would have been, you know. Their focus would have been very different.

[00:43:18] **Fanny Julissa García:** But you mentioned that your parents were really traumatized by the change.

[00:43:27] **Roberta Semer:** Yeah, it upset them very much. I mean, they thought that Lincoln Center was great but they, you know, they realized that. You know, I think when you. When you're close to having been displaced. My father grew up very poor in a boarding house with parents who were immigrants, who spoke— My father learned. So his family spoke English and Yiddish. And when they didn't want the children to understand something they spoke in Russian. So my father understood Russian perfectly. He couldn't speak it, but he understood it. So he understood the—and my mother when she was growing up, at several times, relatives came from Europe who were oppressed and stayed with them until they could find footing. So she understood the whole immigrant package.

[00:44:25] **Roberta Semer:** So when I would tell her about the kids in school not being treated properly. She understood. You know, if you haven't had certain experiences, it's hard to understand. I mean, there's certain things that I just don't understand because I've never you know. If someone can explain them to me, I can kind of get it. But I need that more lengthy explanation. Because I haven't you know, I didn't grow up with that kind of experience. Right? I didn't understand that kind of cuisine because, you know. I mean, I had friends who had different ethnicities. And so I would know the food that they had, but I wouldn't have known about other people's food. You know. So. And I wouldn't have known displacement the way my mother or father would known it.

[00:45:22] **Fanny Julissa García:** Would you have conversations over the dinner table about it or not?

[00:45:28] **Roberta Semer:** Not until I was much older. No, not when I was too little. We talked about a lot of things, but, and my mother probably told us about the churches that she and other people were working on. But, you know, I was little. I wouldn't have remembered. You know, we had our first TV set when I was eight or nine. And the TV set was huge. Oh, and this TV, you know. [DEMONSTRATES SIZE OF SMALL TV SCREEN]

[00:45:58] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. Do you remember what you saw in that little screen?

[00:46:04] **Roberta Semer:** Oh, yeah. There were. We didn't see very much, you know, we'd all sit as close as we could. And our neighbors would come and we'd all watched together. But there were some variety shows. My friend's father did an afternoon interview show. My dad was good friends with Ed Sullivan. And so when Ed, I think by the time ED started doing a show, the screen was maybe this big [DEMONSTRATES SMALL SIZE OF SCREEN WITH HANDS]. So you watch the same—the news with like 15 minutes and everybody watched the same like 3 or 4 channels. And so you discuss with your friends, you know, you if you watched it together. You could you, you all saw it. And if you didn't have a TV, you went to your friend's house. So you could have 15 or 16 people watching, you know, a talent show or you know, a special show. And that was kind of nice. You know these are people you might not normally invited to your home. But you weren't going to deny them the ability to see a TV show. So, you know, people that maybe didn't come for dinner, came and watched TV and had a snack with you. That was kind of fun. I mean, today I would never go call my neighbors and say, let's go watch. You know, which is too bad. But in those days you know if you didn't—we didn't have a TV we went to a neighbor or a friend's house to watch, and then we had our little TV we'd all be sitting on—the kids would be on the floor, the grown ups would be, you know, on some furniture. And it was really nice.

[00:47:58] **Fanny Julissa García:** It sounds like TV watching was a communal event, and now it isn't anymore?

[00:48:04] **Roberta Semer:** No, because now we have our little computers and our little screens or some other. My mother's father was in the car business in Omaha. And when my mother was learning to drive, my mother had two brothers. My grandfather was in business with his two brothers-in-law. And so this is about 1930, 31. My grandfather made my mother learn how to take a car apart and put it back together. Because they would all drive in a caravan to Detroit. And they would buy new and used cars, and each one would drive a car back to Omaha. And in case they got separated from the caravan, they could fix the car. Well, my mother never got lost from the caravan. And for years, when she'd have a car, she would go into the gas station, you know, get the car fix, and she'd say, "the such and such is broken in the car." My mother would have a little white clothes and a little hat, little shoes. And she'd come back to pick the car up and he'd say, "Oh, you were wrong it wasn't that, it was this." So she'd drive home and she'd hear this noise and she'd drive back and say, "You fixed the wrong thing, it's the..." Eventually they figured out she knew what she was talking about. She just didn't like getting grease on her hands. But she knew she could. So my grandfather told stories about. And this is in the 30s and 40s. 50s about an astronaut and he had a watch that predated the Apple Watch. A lot of things that he talked about have come up for me.

[00:50:14] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow.

[00:50:16] **Roberta Semer:** So she had that sensibility about her. That when she said her mind to save a church, that church was getting saved. Or she was going to save a block or she was going to make sure the school, you know. I'm sure she was part of the PTA in schools because she wanted to make sure my sister and I got the best teachers we could. But she also fought for other you know, she knew that not all the moms could come to school and make sure the kids were alright, so she would make sure that. Because in those days you bought milk, you had to bring your penny for milk. And you know if a child didn't have pennies they'd get milk. So there would be funds. So that. Every child got milk. I don't know what happened in other schools, but you know, my mother and her friends

made sure that were sufficient funds, that no child was going to be sitting there while you ate— you know and friends had milk. And you didn't have any.

[00:51:32] **Fanny Julissa García:** What's cool was this activism that.

[00:51:35] **Roberta Semer:** This was the one on 68th and Amsterdam. My sister thought it was P.S. 69. Someone told me it was P.S. 90, I have to find out. And that also disappeared during urban renewal.

[00:51:55] **Fanny Julissa García:** So there are some things that were taken away from.

[00:52:02] **Roberta Semer:** That was before P.S. 191 was built. So which is a better school in a better location. So you know some things— some good came, some bad came. And, you know, some of these tenements were in pretty crappy shape, so, had there been replacements. That would've been fine. The problem is you know. Lincoln Center came in and own this land and the city owned the land and people were, I don't know what they were given, but they were. Whatever it was, it wasn't enough and they weren't given, you know, space to. We've done that in Chinatown too where they tore down a whole bunch of stuff, and now they're finally rebuilding some buildings. But there's no guarantee that 40 years later that people are still around to get it. Where have they been for those 40 years? And when a lot of the tenements were torn down, Amsterdam Houses were full. So the tenements that made up Lincoln Lincoln Towers was, you know, some of them may have gone to—some of them may have wanted to move anyway. You know, at some point. You get a new job, you get married, you whatever, you move on. But I'm sure that was a small percentage.

[00:53:40] **Fanny Julissa García:** Roberta, when you mentioned your mum's gloves and not wanting to get them dirty. Greasy. I thought about what did people wear during those times? What do you remember wearing as a kid growing up in your neighborhood?

[00:54:02] **Roberta Semer:** Oh. That's interesting. Yeah, yeah. So to school, we were either skirts and blasted dresses.

[00:54:09] **Fanny Julissa García:** Was it a uniform?

[00:54:11] **Roberta Semer:** No, no, uniform was a public school. So no uniform. No uniform. But we the girls wore skirts or dresses and the boys wore pants or, you know, I guess in summer they were, you know, in hot weather we wore shorter pants and we wear shorts, t-shirts to play outside. So we take our good clothes off when we got home and put on our play clothes.

[00:54:38] **Fanny Julissa García:** And shoes? What did you wear for shoes?

[00:54:41] **Roberta Semer:** We had little hard—We didn't have sneakers. I don't remember how many—sneakers until I was much older. We had lace up shoes and Mary Janes for girls. If I had my Mary James on, I was out with my family, and I couldn't run. Because I didn't have my running shoes on, because I considered my lace up shoes, my running shoes. So there weren't a lot of choices, you know. I mean, none of us wore eyeglasses, but eyeglasses in those days, there would have been maybe. If you were a kid, you might have had two choices. I mean, even when my older son was little, there weren't a lot of choices for eye glasses. And we would worn. We would have had wool coats for winter, as you know, with a nice knit scarf. And in second grade, we all learn to

knit. The boys and the girls. And then in fourth grade, a different school. We'd all kni—boys and girls. My mother's friend was British and so she insisted we knit the British way, not the German way. Which turns out that it wasn't just the German way. It was European. So to this day, I knit differently than most people.

[00:56:22] **Fanny Julissa García:** And what about the adults?

[00:56:25] **Roberta Semer:** The adults wore. You know, if they weren't, if they weren't working people where they wore work clothes, they were very formal. So the men always had suits. If it was casual, my father might have had a jacket without a tie, but, you know, still pretty formal. And my mother always had a hat. You know, if she were going out the night, she'd have a fancier hat. You know, always stockings even if she had on pants. And her casual clothes would have been what you could wear heels with today.

[00:57:16] **Fanny Julissa García:** Even stockings could be worn even in summer.

[00:57:22] **Roberta Semer:** My mother would have. Most people would not have. But they would not have—if you were going to the beach, you'd have to change your bathing suit and you'd have a cover up. But you cover a lot, you know. And people you know, like my parents loved Sunday. They could just lounge around in a bathrobe and pajamas. And I thought that was the most horrible. I vowed at a young age I would never do that.

[00:58:01] **Fanny Julissa García:** What about class differences in the neighborhood? Was it very evident or not?

[00:58:09] **Roberta Semer:** Well, you know, the few apartment buildings on the street were all pretty much. I had some. And then you had these brownstones with people that you really did not want to associate with. The working people would have lived between Amsterdam and Broadway. And their children would have look much like, you know, their clothes might not have been as well made as mine, but I would not have noticed that. So I would not have—you know to me they, a girl would have had a dress on, a boy with their pants and I would not have known the difference. And my parents didn't want me to know the difference. And I do know that, you know, I went to the homes of some people who were quite affluent. And I knew that because the apartments were much bigger and there was a lot more stuff. And I'd go to apartments where there was less stuff than my family had. Less affluent. But we didn't really. We were raised not to, you know, it was the way we were raised. So it was who we were hanging out with. So we're hanging out with like-minded people. So we were, you know, we treated everybody with respect. My father always taught me, you know, when you go into work that you treat everybody nicely. So even though he was the boss, you know, the lowest person in the mailroom would have been somebody that you would go out of your way to be nice to.

[00:59:52] **Roberta Semer:** So my dad had an art department at 20th Century Fox. And my sister and I would sometimes get to go and visit. And we would ask the artist to draw a fairy. And we'd ask them to draw them. We tell them we're going to have a contest. And so we each pick the one we thought was the best. And sometimes we'd go and we ask them to draw a ballerina or we'd have, you know, whatever, or a ghost. And so years later, I said to my father, "Why did you let us do that?" He said, "Well, they were drawing for the movies." There's an art department store for movies at Fox that often were advertising for children. And so he said it was important for them to understand the mind of a child. What a child liked. So when we'd tell them why we like this fairy over that fairy. We were actually educating them. I thought that was absolutely brilliant. My father also played a game with

us. So, so much fun. And he wasn't one to really get down and dirty with kids. But if we were getting bored, we were on the subway. We were sitting in a cart waiting for someone. What are the ten things about it that you could do with that? So. You know. We once had somebody's baby carriage in our house. One of the ten things we could do with the baby carriage that wouldn't involve pushing a baby. Or if we're on a train, we're going somewhere and someone had a potted plant. What are the ten things we could do with that potted plant? "Put it on the shelf behind Fanny's wall!" And we've come up with crazy things, and nothing was wrong with it. It was just to keep your mind...

[01:01:59] **Fanny Julissa García:** Going.

[01:02:00] **Roberta Semer:** Yeah. So I mean, that's how we were raised. So we weren't raised to, you know, be prejudiced, we weren't raised to think less of somebody if they couldn't. And my mother would get very mad because. Right after the war were more—foreigners were coming as tourists to this country. And salespeople at stores or somebody on the street trying to help them would start screaming at them, thinking that if they talked louder, they'd understand them. They couldn't understand. Like if I tell you to go three blocks and turn right. And you don't understand me. It doesn't matter how loud I scream at you, because you're still not going to understand it. And she would say to us that that doesn't help. You have to do is figure out how to communicate with them. You know what I mean? So we learned to be more tolerant.

[01:02:54] **Fanny Julissa García:** I really appreciate that. Do you remember seeing any of the evidence of urban renewal or, you know, like I see photos, for example, and there's rubble and there's whole blocks raised or even, for example, West Side Story, some of West Side Story. The film was, on location. And you can see in the background that, you know, the emptiness.

[01:03:25] **Roberta Semer:** Emptiness that would have been in the 50s, right? I would have been out of the city then. But the U.N. was definitely it was rubble. It was, you know, you could see how it was all beat up. And then there were streets in San Juan Hill that weren't that nice. There were some very nice streets, but there were some streets that were kind of, you know, you would not have wanted to go down there unless you absolutely had to. I mean, when I moved back to the city in 1988, there were streets on the Upper West Side I would not walk down. Just because of gangs and drugs and whatnot. So, you know, there always were certain areas where you just felt safe and there were areas where you just didn't feel safe. Like Central Park. We were not allowed to go into Riverside Park or into Central Park alone. And the only one time I went with a child, I went with a boy who was a year or two older than me. But if I was with a girl, we had to have a grown up with this. So obviously stuff was happening, that I just wasn't privy to.

[01:04:37] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah. And in the 50s you were already away, where did you go?

[01:04:41] **Roberta Semer:** We moved. We moved to Westchester.

[01:04:44] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay. The family. The whole family.

[01:04:46] **Roberta Semer:** The whole family relocated. Right. It would have been a whole different world. You know, we would have come into the city, but we would have either gone to my dad's office at this point, he was in business for himself. Or we would have gone to a museum or to a concert or to something, but not. And I did have a friend that

lived on the Upper West Side that lived probably on 68th Street, but she lived off of, she didn't live in that area. She lived off of. You know. So she was... her building is still there too. And I would sometimes come in and spend the night with her. But it was, you know. So I wouldn't have been that aware of. I was definitely aware during the construction of Lincoln Center. And I don't think I understood. That these people were moved. Were not moved. That they were. I don't think I really understood that until a couple of years later that they weren't you know, moved to this building. Moved this, two blocks away. That they were actually. We're taking your building and too bad.

[01:06:17] **Roberta Semer:** I think by the time I was capable of really understanding that. And then, of course, when I moved back to the city and I saw how Lincoln Center was walled off from Amsterdam. It was like, "Wow!" But things were done in those days tha just didn't make a lot of sense. But no one really. Newspapers didn't really explain it. The radio and TV didn't really explain it. You know, so unless you knew someone that was. You know, had I stayed the city, there were people that would have told me. I would have learned. I would have had friends who were telling me they had to move away because their buildings being destroyed. But because I was too remote from it, I didn't. I didn't have that. I think that's one of the problems today is that you know, unless you have friends, across ethnicities and races and religion. You know, if you're very isolated, you're only your enclave. You only work with a certain kind of, you know, take doctors. Doctors always tend to be friends among themselves. So if you know, if your group is a certain professional class that we tend to only socialize with them. You're not going to understand distance.

[01:07:52] **Fanny Julissa García:** Right?

[01:07:56] **Roberta Semer:** I mean, that's why you want diversity in colleges. Because you want kids during their formative, you know, when they're becoming adults to have different religions, different races, different backgrounds, different. You know, blue collar, white collar, green color, whatever to really get to understand that we're all the same. And we lost so much. We lost musicians, we lost artists. We lost. You know what happened to those? We don't know what happened to those kids. I suppose you could take some census data and try and follow. But you could look at a block because you'd have the census data for when was this torn down, 1960. So you could look at this 1960 census data before it was torn down, and try and find some of these people. That might be interesting. But you know, there's so much we lost that we. We'll never know.

[01:09:14] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah, definitely. You mentioned musicians, artists that were lost. I think one question that I'm curious about is what people were listening to at the time. For example, when I came to New York eight years ago in 2016, and my first home when I arrived was in West Harlem. And now I live in Central Harlem. And West Harlem is very Latino, Dominican and Puerto Rican. And I see the difference in my migration within the city, you know.

[01:09:59] **Roberta Semer:** Right.

[01:10:00] **Fanny Julissa García:** Central Harlem, when I come out the door, what I hear in the streets is like R&B, jazz versus Latino music in West Harlem.

[01:10:11] **Roberta Semer:** Yeah. Well, I think when Puerto Ricans came in, they brought the Latino music with them. But, you know, at that point there was basically with the classical music. So it was before rock and roll. So it would have been. Not so much folk

music either. Not in New York. You know, folk music would have been around, but so it would have been Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, that kind of, you know, easy listening music. And then the big bands. Big bands were very popular and there was a lot of jazz. So it was really I mean I grew up with this big wonderful mixture of music.

[01:11:02] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you think there was a difference in music being played where you lived versus.

[01:11:09] **Roberta Semer:** I think so. I mean, it would have been more jazz. It would have more of a different, you know, more free flowing kind of jazz. Where I mine might have been more of the big band, the Ella Fitzgeralds. You know. Because even Harlem in those days had, you know. It was a similar kind of, you know, we're still that big band sound. But there were enclaves around the city where music definitely would've been different.

[01:11:48] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you remember? You mentioned that there were some streets in San Juan Hill that you definitely would think twice about walking through. Do you remember what those streets were?

[01:11:59] **Roberta Semer:** I don't. I just, you know, for whatever reason. You know.

[01:12:04] **Fanny Julissa García:** You remember that?

[01:12:06] **Roberta Semer:** I just remember that there were.

[01:12:09] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah. And then. Do you recall that there was conversation around the types of people that lived in San Juan Hill versus the neighborhood that you lived in?

[01:12:28] **Roberta Semer:** My family would not. My parents had friends of many ethnic, many, you know, in part. I mean they were intellectuals. But they also had friends that were musicians. They had friends who were African American. They have friends who were Hispanic. They had friends who were, you know, across the board. So, you know, basically most of the people they hung out with were fellow business people. But they did have some very interesting, you know, friends, they had, gay friends—openly gay friends. I lived in a unique—even of my friends, my house was more unique. You know, during the war, cousins from all across America came and stayed with us for a day or two. So I saw cousins who didn't speak to each other, you know. Cousin A who was here three weeks ago wouldn't have talked to Cousin B who was coming, you know, next week. I didn't know that. They were all just really nice. And it was fun to see them. You know, most of our cousins were Jewish. We had some cousins who weren't. You know, so I wouldn't have had that sense. And I was too little to have really heard, you know, to have been at somebody else's house and heard them say something.

[01:13:58] **Roberta Semer:** I got engaged and I went to my husband's family home in New Jersey. We were going out to dinner. They were taking us out to dinner. And I thought that was kind of fun. So I said to my husband. My husband was a resident at a hospital. And so I thought, this is kind of nice. I said, "Where are we going?" He said, "Oh we're going to the chinks." And I said, "Well, what kind of food is that?" And he kind of looked at me, and I had no idea that was a derogatory word for Chinese people. I had never heard that. It just. My father kicked somebody out of the house once when a guest was visiting because they told a derogatory joke about somebody—about an ethnic group. So I just heard. And I

went to college in the Midwest. And was back in New York. I really just had never heard so many. So. And yet I was exposed to a lot. You know, it's hard to imagine that I had I hadn't heard. You know, I knew very few dirty words. Nobody would have ever sworn in front of my mother. So my father, whom I'm sure swore. My father had a friend who was a Jewish comedian, absolutely brilliant. And my mother and his wife spoke no Yiddish. So if they wanted to tell a dirty joke, they told it in Yiddish. I mean, that's how my sister and I grew up. So we're kind of in a bubble, but not in a bubble.

[01:15:59] **Fanny Julissa García:** Right?

[01:16:01] **Roberta Semer:** You know, because we knew, we knew people from other countries who didn't speak English that well, you know, that we'd try and communicate with. But that was just so much we didn't hear. Which in a way was kind of nice, if you think about it. So, you know, when I found myself in my 20s, it was like, oh my gosh, what's happening in this world?

[01:16:29] **Fanny Julissa García:** Where did you go to college everyday?

[01:16:31] **Roberta Semer:** I went to the University of Cincinnati. That was my teenage rebellion. My sister went to Smith. My parents wanted me to go to an all girls school in the East. Very close friends of the families whose daughter had convinced my sister to go to Smith. They both went with me to the University of Cincinnati and they convinced me to go to the University Cincinnati. So my parents, my father had a heart attack and his doctor told him to to go on vacation. So they went—during my senior year, they went on vacation for three weeks to Jamaica so they were out of a communication. The day after they left, I went to the guidance counselor and I handed in my application for the University of Cincinnati. And I said, my mother forgot to sign this before she left, and the guidance counselor took care of it. My mother came back. And about a week after she was back, there was a letter from the president of the University of Cincinnati and my sister applied to college so my mother knew that presidents at universities don't write students. So I come home from school and she's like, "What is this?" And I said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you." And I also got into Michigan, but I didn't want to go there because it just seemed too big. So it was the wrong choice, but it was safe. It was okay.

[01:17:59] **Fanny Julissa García:** What did you study?

[01:18:00] **Roberta Semer:** I studied psychology and philosophy. And the sad thing. I graduated in 1962. All the boys in psychology. The faculty helped them get into graduate school. Nobody helped me at all. So I graduated with a degree basically in nothing. And no graduate school. So my mother, who had been very active in public education, tried to get me into one school and I couldn't. So I ended up at Teachers College at Columbia and got— was working on a master's in early childhood development. Got married instead. Went to work to help put my husband through his residency. And then, when my kids were little, I ended up getting a masters in Clinical Psychology. Just before I completed that, I ended up in a terrible divorce. And I was offered a job working at the state hospital in New Jersey with schizophrenics who were really in bad shape. And my mother decided that was not a good idea, that I should go into advertising. So I went into advertising because I couldn't. First of all, I would have been super depressed and was making so little money that I couldn't support it. I have two kids, so it made the most sense. I'm. But, you know, it's a degree I've used. Like, you know, you learn a skill.

[01:19:38] **Fanny Julissa García:** Roberta is that why—I'm going to transition now into your work and at the community board. Is your career in advertising—is that why you were so interested in social media when you were part of the community board?

[01:19:58] **Roberta Semer:** Not really. And, you know, social media never took off. I think we had 100 followers or maybe 300 at the most. And I don't think, you know, I don't think community boards get a lot of social media.

[01:20:13] **Fanny Julissa García:** Right? Yeah. They have to have like a group.

[01:20:17] **Roberta Semer:** We had 2 or 3 people and we just. One person did Facebook. I did some stuff on Twitter, but we didn't, you know, we didn't. It wasn't catching. We didn't have a following.

[01:20:32] **Fanny Julissa García:** So you got married, got a divorce.

[01:20:37] **Roberta Semer:** Moved to Westchester. So I got divorced in Jersey, moved to Westchester, raised my kids in Westchester. Was working in the city, was commuting, kids were in college. I was coming home alone to an empty house. And I said, "This is crazy." So I looked at a lot of different apartments and decided on this apartment.

[01:21:00] **Fanny Julissa García:** Why did you want to come back to New York City?

[01:21:02] **Roberta Semer:** I was working in the city. And I was living, you know, I was alone in a community of couples with families. I could save money. I didn't need a car. I could save on insurance. I didn't have to clean gutters. I didn't have to plow the driveway. You know. So time, energy and money. And it turned out to be a good thing.

[01:21:35] **Fanny Julissa García:** And why did you decide to become involved in the community board there?

[01:21:40] **Roberta Semer:** When I moved here. Our former president. Whose name I hate to say, but—

[01:21:49] **Fanny Julissa García:** You don't have to.

[01:21:50] **Roberta Semer:** I was trying to build, had bought property in Riverside South and was trying to build Riverside South. And so the president at the co-op board, who would help me find my apartment got me involved. So I organized. I had all the Lincoln Tower buildings, and I had a total of 20 buildings at one point. And we're all reside in Riverside South, and we would meet with all the electeds, and we would convince them that it was a bad thing. And then the environmental impact statement came out. It was a box about this big and this high [GESTURES HEIGHT WITH HANDS] and I had 5 or 6 people. We met at my house every week, and we each went through part of it because it was no way. So we had a lawyer, an urban planner, an architect. I forget who the other two people were, and so we could take sections and write notes, and we testified at all the hearings and whatnot. Ruth Messinger was borough president. Met with us, but she decided to vote for the—She was the only elected on that whole, from the South Street Seaport all the way up to Washington Heights. She's the only elected on the West Side that voted for Riverside South. So, anyway, she appointed me. So I was on the community board in the 90s. And then I got off. And then I came back on in 2010 when Riverside Center was coming up for approval. I've learned a lot and I think I've helped a lot. I think,

you know. People take credit for a lot of stuff, but I think I was involved in a lot of stuff that I feel good about it.

[01:23:40] **Fanny Julissa García:** What's one of your proudest things that you feel about?

[01:23:44] **Roberta Semer:** We got the public school for PS 191 on Riverside Center. We got affordable housing for seniors on 108th Street. We've gotten three bike lanes. We've gotten the subway station at 72nd Street expanded. We've gotten, you know, safer streets.

[01:24:13] **Fanny Julissa García:** Describe to me.

[01:24:15] **Roberta Semer:** Then there are few little things, like we got a speed bump somewhere and I can walk down the street. "Look at that speed bump!" That's a nice feeling.

[01:24:26] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah. Describe to me why those small things matter in a city that is so densely populated.

[01:24:41] **Roberta Semer:** Because it actually does save lives and it does make the quality of life better. You know when Riverside South first went online, they were expanding the subway stations. I begged them to make the roadway, not the roadway but the, the area surrounding they had houses—longer and bigger. I brought people. We testified, I brought all kinds of people to all of the hearings and they decided not to do it. And then eventually somebody was killed and suddenly they've expanded those. You know, the areas leading up to the stations. You shouldn't have to have someone die. When I lived in New Jersey, they were a middle school and elementary school, and it was a main road between them, and there was no traffic light. And I wanted to organize that. My husband is the doctor in town. So I have some. People know who I am. So I wanted to organize all the PTA and all the parents to ask, trying to get us a stoplight there. And everyone was like, "No, we couldn't do it." And then a kid was killed. And we got to a stoplight. And it's like, "Don't wait for someone to get killed!" So every time we get a speed bump, I feel good because. Or we get the sidewalk enlarged so there's a shorter crossing time. I feel good about it because I'm thinking it's one less life that's going to get, you know. I mean, it's little. But in some way it's big.

[01:26:33] **Fanny Julissa García:** I think it's big.

[01:26:35] **Roberta Semer:** Yeah. I mean, it's little for the rest of the world, but it's big for our corner. You know, if you know you can get across the street in 20 seconds that's fine. But if you're using a walker or you have a baby in a carriage or you're, you know, and you'd need 25 seconds and there's more of you with the disability than there are of me that can make it a 20 seconds. You want to make sure that the time is now 25 seconds. It's small, but in a way it's big.

[01:27:15] **Fanny Julissa García:** Right, right. Why did you want to get involved?

[01:27:21] **Roberta Semer:** I think my family. We're always involved. You know, we were activists.

[01:27:27] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah.

[01:27:28] **Roberta Semer:** We were all, you know, I've been involved in every community I've lived in. You know, to whatever level it could be depending upon where my family you know. You know, I was involved in high school. I was involved in middle school. I was involved not so much in college. But every other community that I lived in, I've always been very involved in stuff. I know a lot of people, community that—I'm very involved with a couple of, you know, 3 or 4 organizations in the community. And I like making connections between people. It just makes your life fuller. I mean, that's what you know, if you're more of an activist, it makes your life fuller.

[01:28:24] **Fanny Julissa García:** Well, Roberta, I don't want to take up too much of your time. I only have two more questions.

[01:28:30] **Roberta Semer:** Okay.

[01:28:32] **Fanny Julissa García:** One of them is—Tell me what your motivations were for participating in this oral history. Why did you want to talk to us and share your memories and your stories?

[01:28:51] **Roberta Semer:** I think it's important. I mean, even though I wasn't part of San Juan Hill, and I wasn't in one of the tenements in Lincoln Towers. I experienced it, and I've lived through it and I'm now back in. I'm living over where some displaced people lived. Although I'm not responsible for their having been displaced, I know I am aware of the fact that this building displaced people. In a way that wasn't good. You know had this building been built and people were told they were going to move here. That would have been fine and we could have had eight buildings. One of them could have been for all the people that lived in the community and the other seven could have been. Right? And I remember growing up as a child. I mean, we really loved New York City. We loved the—We loved the fact that it was a diverse community and that everyone didn't look like you and everyone didn't. You know, we all wear dresses and skirts, but we didn't look like each other. You know, some of us have more conservative clothes, so we'll just have brighter colors. Some of us, you know, had braids some of us didn't have braids. You know, we all had neat hair because you were required to have a clean face to to go to school, but we still were... You know, if you look at some classes there. You can't tell which child is which because they all look like. And I'm now on the board of Landmark West! learning about how important it is to—How important communities are at maintaining a sense of community.

[01:30:39] **Fanny Julissa García:** And then my last question is something that we always ask in these kinds of interviews, which is there something that I didn't ask you that you would want to share, that you want to make sure is part of the recording?

[01:30:57] **Roberta Semer:** So that's a good question. I think the vibrancy of the neighborhood. We had a very vibrant, you know, San Juan Hill was vibrant. People. Some people lived in very poor circumstances, but there was a sense of there was a sense of community, a sense of vibrancy that we lose when we lose you know. My building's working so hard to try and create community. You know, when people get on the elevator, they don't say hello to each other. You know, my mother and her friend used to clean each other's closets out together. I told you, we all sat and watched TV together. Someone knocked on the door and said, "Are you watching such and such a show?" We wouldn't have said, "Oh we don't like you, don't come in." We would have said, "Yeah, you know, there's 16 of us, now there will be 19 of us." You know, we've lost that.

[01:32:05] **Roberta Semer:** When would Biden won the election on a Saturday. I heard. I knew he won only because I heard noise on the street. And I went up to 72nd Street to the subway stations, and there were musicians playing and people were dancing. It was a community, you know. Suddenly we were a community of strangers and we lost that, you know. And my street, even though I wasn't in San Juan Hill, I knew all the kids on the street because we played up the street. We've lost that. That's something we have to try and get back. You know, whether its small groups or however we do it. We gotta get that back.

[01:32:55] **Fanny Julissa García:** Did the neighborhood that you lived in have a name like San Juan Hill that had its name?

[01:33:00] **Roberta Semer:** No.

[01:33:01] **Fanny Julissa García:** What is it referred to as now?

[01:33:05] **Roberta Semer:** The Upper West Side, the 60s. So we had a—my father taught us a song, so we'd know where we lived. It was, "The first apartment building on the west, on the west. The first apartment building on the West Side." So we knew the street number. And if we didn't remember the place number, it was the first of all the other buildings, because all the other buildings were low.

[01:33:30] **Fanny Julissa García:** I love that. Thank you so much. This has been a joy to speak with you. I've learned so much, and I really appreciate what you've been able to witness growing up here in the city. I think a lot of people could learn a lot from it.

[01:33:52] **Roberta Semer:** Well. Thank you. This was fun.

[01:33:54] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yeah. Thank you. I'm going to stop the recording right now, but don't go away so we can say our proper goodbyes. Thank you so much, Roberta.

[01:34:03] **Roberta Semer:** This was fun.