

Name of Interviewee: Stuart Keil

Recording Identification: Rec004_0049

Google Drive Folder: Oral Histories / Montclair150 / montclair150-01-keil

Additional Materials: No Additional Materials Provided.

Interviewer: Victoria Lizotte, Justin Millet, Jane Eliasof

Date: 07/11/2018

Location: Clark House and Library

Introduction:

Stuart Keil's grandparents immigrated to the United States in the 1920's and on the boat, his grandfather changed his name from Kuchen to Keil. They were fairly successful owners of a liquor store in Delaware. Mr. Keil's parents moved to Montclair in 1932 and purchased a pharmacy in Upper Montclair [732 Valley Road @ Laurel Place]. Born just before World War II, Mr. Keil and his twin sister saw the effect rationing had on a small business, however his father's good nature and rapport with his suppliers resulted in the wholesalers helping him as much as possible with supplies. He talked about this period being a time of change in the pharmacies, when pharmacists moved from compounding drugs to selling commercially-made drugs. Stuart worked in the family store from an early age and eventually worked with his wife (whose family also owned a retail establishment, a five and dime store in Caldwell) and one of his two sons in their own store.

He remembers the town before it became the diverse, multicultural place that it is today. Growing up, Montclair's citizenry was predominantly of white Protestants. Everyone knew that he was Jewish, but it was not brought up and he worked at fitting in. He describes it as "a time of omission, you did not reveal the things that made you different." As a Jew, he realized that his father had limited options for employment, leading his father and eventually himself to pharmaceuticals. During this time, he recalled that there were only a few golf courses that admitted Jews. He witnessed a change in Montclair when "separate but equal" ruling led to the creation of the high quality magnet school system, leading Montclair to becoming a very liberal community.

Following his father, Mr. Keil became active in the Rotary Club and remained a member for 33 years. He speaks about the work they do as an organization. He is proud to have been an active, contributing member of Montclair and thinks it's a fine town.

Timestamps:

[0:00]: His father moved to Montclair in August, 1937, because he bought a pharmacy in Upper Montclair. It became Keil's Pharmacy [732 Valley Road at Laurel Place]. Both sides of his family came from Russia/Poland, whichever it was at the moment. His parents were recently married when they moved to Montclair, and brought up their family on Dryden Road, off Grove Street near Brookdale Park. He has a twin sister who currently lives in California.

[1:45]: Growing up in a family business, in one sense he felt very connected to the community. Retail businesses became vital in the late 1930s because everyone realized the war was coming. He remembers it being hard to do business during WWII and get merchandise, and his father's

suppliers were very loyal to his father, due likely in part because his father was a very, very nice man. Stuart explains that Montclair was very different than it is today: it was a predominantly white, Protestant town, and his family is Jewish. He explains that it was a time you did whatever you could to fit in. There were only a few times he was made to feel uncomfortable because of his Jewish faith. But it was a time of omission, you did not reveal the things that made you different. Despite that, it was a very nice time to grow up, it was the country compared to places like Newark where many people were moving from. Montclair was, as it is now, a nice place to grow up.

[4:00]: He was raised a conservative Jew, and went to the temple on 67 Park Street [Shomrei Emunah]. His mother was very active in helping furnish and build the synagogue. He never talked about the holidays, like Passover, with his [non-Jewish] friends. People knew he was Jewish, but it was not a conversation topic.

[5:10]: During WWII, rationing made it hard to get certain goods. He specifically remembers paper being difficult to get. His father did okay during the war, because he was well-liked by wholesalers and they did what they could for him. This was a time of change in pharmacies. They began to have commercial, patented drugs. Stuart explains that compounding is combining chemicals in quantities and percentages to create the necessary medication, since patented commercially made prescription products weren't available. Thyroid medication and dermatological medications were frequently compounded. Lab tests also became more available and more accurate, thus leading to specific compounding formulas from the prescribing doctors.

[7:51]: He and his sister were not socially active together, they never really were in the same social circles until they graduated from high school. He went to Northeast Elementary School, they walked about a mile to school every day from Dryden Road – walking home for lunch, too. He remembered they went from kindergarten to fourth grade. He went to Mount Hebron Middle School, which is Buzz Aldrin Middle School today. That ran from fifth through eighth on the first floor. And ninth grade was on the second floor, with high school being tenth through twelfth. He was a member of the band in high school, as a drummer.

[10:23]: Stuart remembers picking the drums to play because he couldn't play anything else!

[10:41]: He worked in his dad's store from a very young age; it is among his first memories. He used to stock cigarettes, help in the soda fountain and mop the floors. As he got older, he took on more duties. His mother also worked in that business, so his life was always centered on that store.

[11:43]: Later in life, he worked with his wife and son in the pharmacy. They had meetings to talk and define roles, and made a decision not to argue - certainly not in front of customers – especially because as a pharmacy, you're often dealing with people who don't feel well. They would try to leave personal life outside of the company. He mentions that to get along with your parents, you need to make a plan for it and everyone needs to give a little. You need to actively work on it.

[14:05]: His family and get-togethers revolved around the schedule of the family business. As a pharmacy, they wanted to help people and as a retail store, they were open many hours. His mother took his wife (then girlfriend) aside and warned her that retail is a very demanding

lifestyle. The hours are very demanding and it can be exhausting. Much like restaurants – very demanding.

[16:46]: His sister married a well established New York City businessman, and had never had intentions to enter into the family business.

[17:10]: His favorite holiday was Thanksgiving. He had a big, extended family and they all got together to enjoy the company, without any strings attached. They all got along very well.

[17:40]: He met his wife just after he graduated college; she was a freshman. They met at a student get together at the Caldwell Synagogue, something both of them were sort of pushed into attending by their parents. They dated for the four years she was in college and got married when she graduated. He commuted to the Rutgers College of Pharmacy in North Newark. His wife went to Cedarcrest College in Allentown, PA. She grew up in Caldwell, and her parents owned a five and dime retail store on Bloomfield Ave [current site of Cloverleaf] so she knew about the retail world.

[19:50]: They got married in Temple Shomrei on Park Street. The wedding had a big crowd, as many people knew them. His father was a member of the Knoll Golf Club in Parsippany and they held the reception there. He remembers that it was an unofficial recreation spot for “mob” elements from Newark. His father got involved because there were only a few places Jews could go play golf during the time period. It reminds him that his family was in the minority, and it impacted many, many aspects of life.

[22:10]: During World War Two, he had no awareness of the Holocaust until after the war. He knew one family who lived in Europe at the time on a mini-farm and had people living in the barn for some reason, and that suddenly they were gone. His grandparents came over in the 1920s. His “name” story is that Max Kuchen got on the boat, and Max Keil came off; by the time he disembarked, he had decided to change his name, but it was never explained why. Perhaps Keil sounded more aristocratic, possibly German (if you reverse the e and i). He owned a bar/liquor store in Wilmington, DE and his family became very successful. He believes that it’s the immigrant story – even today – to come over to the United States and open up retail stores to become independent practitioners in their profession (like doctors, lawyers).

[25:50]: As a Jewish man, his father limited options for employment back then. His father could not work in a corporation or in insurance, so he became a pharmacist.

[27:11]: He noticed a change in the attitude toward Jewish people in the 1980s when the Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” was not legal. Montclair changed the school system in response. They bussed everyone to the schools and created the magnet school system. Not without its problems, but progressive. It made Montclair a very liberal community at the time. This meant that a lot of people from New York City began to move in. Despite the high taxes and high house prices, upward-moving people would choose Montclair because they could utilize the public school system, which was considered high quality, rather than spend on private education.

[29:24]: He lives in West Orange. He remembers growing up and his father would get phone calls 24/7 about people wanting to go to the store at all hours - not always for true emergencies. Stuart moved 15 minutes away from his store to create a bit of a barrier for people reaching out other than for true medical emergencies. Many independent stores went out of business.

[30:59]: He has two sons, and a granddaughter. One of his sons worked in a company that offered no real advancement, so he moved to work for him in the pharmacy, establishing a home health equipment division in the store that proved successful. His other son manages a successful boat dealership for his wife's family.

[34:00]: He closed the family store [pharmacy] when it stopped making money. Stuart was paying for the privilege to go to work. The competition in Montclair was not so much from the chain pharmacies, because he could hold his own with retail offerings and the customer service he provided. But he couldn't compete on price with the internet and mail order pharmacies; customers' willingness to buy medicine via mail order surprised pharmacists. Low insurance company reimbursements also hurt the industry. The people who bought his store only fill prescriptions and have no community involvement. It is the only way to make money. He says that insurance companies stole the industry.

[37:12]: Stuart is involved in the Rotary Club, and his family has been very involved. He and his wife were on the North Jersey District Committee and hosted many exchange students; they stay in touch with them – and even the children of the exchange students. He got involved in Rotary after his father was asked to join. Since his father was preparing to retire, he asked his son to join instead of him. He spent 43 years in the Rotary Club so far [1974], and mentions that he was one of the youngest people to join. Membership in Rotary, as in other similar service clubs, has dropped from 80 members to 16 today, and it's difficult to attract young members.

[40:01]: Rotary has done a lot of good work in Montclair. It is involved in the food kitchens. They run Taste of Montclair where they bring restaurants together. They also raise money for food charities as well as other charities like the Montclair House. Montclair Rotary is involved with International Rotary, which has been very involved in polio eradication, bringing the cost of the vaccine down significantly; they helped eliminate around 99% of polio cases worldwide. Rotary is quietly influential. Attempts to increase visibility and “toot their own horn” are balanced with use of funds to those in need. He reminds us to look before you give, to verify that a high percentage of your donation is going to those in need rather than to those administering the charity.

[43:59]: He is very proud of Montclair and what it has become. Stuart claims that the choices made in the 1980s [magnet school system] were monumental and made Montclair a leader in the world. Montclair does not have an elected board of education, because the people on the board are trusted to make the right choices. He warns that splinter groups could take over it if they had elections due to the small [voter] turnout. He never realized just how good Montclair is until he moved to West Orange. The lack of diversity and community involvement there made him realize just how motivated people of Montclair are to do the right thing, even if it requires a lot of conversation and discussion of different viewpoints. He found that if you really want to be happy, and call yourself successful, it's tied to making other people happy. It's not about how much money you have in the bank. He is satisfied that he's led a good life, proud of his family, confident that he's left a good trail behind him on this trip called life. He is proud to say that he was part of the fabric of Montclair, helping to make it a better, livable, enjoyable town.