

Interviewer:

Good afternoon. Today is October 23, 2015, and I am here with Mr. Lou Gross at his home, and sir, thank you for having us down here today.

Lou Gross:

You're welcome.

Interviewer:

Sir, would you please spell your last name for our transcriber?

Lou Gross:

G-R-O-S-S.

Interviewer:

Thank you, sir. Now sir, tell me a little bit about yourself, please. Tell me where you were born, when you were born, and what you did growing up.

Lou Gross:

I was born in Brooklyn in December of 1930. I grew up in a predominately Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn and went to Public School 122 and graduated when I was about 13. And went to Brooklyn Technical High School, where I studied electricity; and the electrical course then was a lot different than it is today. However, the power distribution and transmission creation is pretty much the same. I joined the National Guard. I graduated from high school in 1948, and won a competitive appointment to West Point.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

Lou Gross:

And I entered the Academy in July of 1950.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. What did your folks do when you were growing up, sir?

Lou Gross:

My mother was a housewife. I had an older sister and a younger brother, both of whom are still alive, and my father worked in the garment industry. We lived in Brooklyn, and he would take the subway train into Manhattan every day and come home in the evening.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. It sounds like a pretty good childhood.

Lou Gross:

Yes, it was a very sheltered childhood. I had never eaten in a restaurant until I was in a mess hall in the National Guard.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. So why did you join the National Guard?

Lou Gross:

Well, it was I was a little active or wild as a young man, and it was an outlet. I thought it would be interesting, and it was. It was in 1948. The Korean War was looming. The Second World War was over, and I had missed it. And I thought it would be something I would want to do.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, how long were you in the National Guard?

Lou Gross:

Well, I was in the National Guard for two years, and I won a competitive appointment to West Point. So I left the National Guard as a Sergeant First Class.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, that seems that you advanced in rank fairly quickly.

Lou Gross:

Yes. Well, the National Guard was not populated with brain surgeons in 1948, and a high

school graduate was a rarity. But I was attending City College School of Engineering, which gave me another leg up.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you received rank for being smart and hardworking.

Lou Gross:

Yes. Well, I was in a Communications Section. It was an Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion, and aside from dragging the cables and connecting everything, someone had to twist the dials.

Interviewer:

So how did the competitive nomination to West Point come up?

Lou Gross:

Well, I was in the National Guard, and at a monthly meeting the First Sergeant was reading off all his messages, and announced that there were competitive examinations for West Point and said, "Who wants to go to West Point?" I raised my hand, and he said, "Gross, you want to go to West Point?" And I said, "Yes, I do." And I took the statewide examinations, which were like the Regents examinations. And I came from a family where if you got 98, my mother wanted to know what happened to the other two points, so I made the state cut. And then we took the National Board Examination, which was like the College Entrance Board, and I scored high enough to be accepted among the 90 Guardsmen who were selected each year from the Reserves in the United States.

Interviewer:

Okay. What did you think when you arrived at West Point?

Lou Gross:

Well, the only contact I ever had with West Point was watching a movie about West Point, and I thought it was going to be a great experience. I didn't anticipate any problems, but I soon learned that being a large fish in a small lake is very different from being a small fish in a very large lake. It was an experience. I found academics not a challenge. I made some good friends. I roomed with two guys for all four years, both of whom are now deceased, and we had a lot of fun.

All three of us, we carried rifles for all four years, and were not overly shocked with the system. We did what we had to. We were not very enthusiastic about the military. My two roommates went into the Air Force, as I would've done; however, I was 20/30 in my left eye, and Air Force required 20/20 uncorrected vision in those days. It seems like the Dark Ages when you go back to 1954 compared to today.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Everybody remembers something from their R Day. Do you remember something in particular from R Day? What stands out to you?

Lou Gross:

R Day stands out reporting to the third Sergeant for the fourth time and trying to get free of all the guys that were barking at me. That is a memorable event.

Interviewer:

What Company were you in?

Lou Gross:

B2. We were the B2 Beetles.

Interviewer:

Okay. And what Barracks did you live in?

Lou Gross:

Old North, where the - it was demolished to make way for the new Mess Hall expansion.

Interviewer:

Okay. All right.

Lou Gross:

But we were on the second floor, and the facilities were in the basement, and it was not like

the air-conditioned individual rooms that the new Cadet Barracks will have.

Interviewer:

So I imagine hot summers, cold winters?

Lou Gross:

Yes. Although from New York, it was not a surprise. I remember the snow and the cold weather. And the summer at Buckner after Plebe year was not the greatest, and Beast Barracks certainly was a physical challenge, but I made it.

Interviewer:

Did your experience in the New York National Guard help prepare you a little bit?

Lou Gross:

Well, it gave me somewhat of an insight in what the military was like. However, nothing could've really prepared me.

Interviewer:

How were academics for you?

Lou Gross:

Academics were all right. In those days, the instructors were mostly Captains who were three pages ahead of the class in the textbook, and having gone to Brooklyn Tech for the practical experience and City College for the theoretical experience, I had taken differential and integral calculus, and differential equations, so mathematics was not a problem. English was something I never really mastered until Captain J.S.D. Eisenhower, who was my English P., taught us about writing directly.

And not subjectively, and not getting lost. But academics was not too bad.

Interviewer:

Now, I imagine most of the Professors and the Tactical Officers, I imagine most of them were World War II veterans.

Lou Gross:

Yes. There was an occasional Field Grade Officer, Air Force. I remember in my German class Herr Oberst Feucht, who was in charge of Prisoner Interrogation in Europe, and he would interrogate the German P.O.W.s to determine if they were mechanically inclined, or if they were farm boys, so we'd know if they had an Infantry Division or an Armor Division in the area. I remember he would constantly yell at me, "Kein Yiddish, Herr Gross. Nur Deutsch," in that my parents spoke Yiddish and I was reasonably fluent in it.

And it beat studying German, so I managed to get through Language class okay. I don't know what I would've done if I drew Russian.

Interviewer:

Did you do any sports at the Academy?

Lou Gross:

Yes. I played inter-murder all four years, only contact sports. I played football. I played and coached basketball, and I refereed basketball. Soccer, lacrosse. Lacrosse in intramural was you hit each other with sticks, and we were in a runt Company, and we prided ourselves on killing the flankers. We were arranged in order of height in those days, and I was 5'8". If I were 5'7-1/2" I would be in A2. If I was 5'8-1/2" I would be in C2. We were in the Second Battalion; there were two Battalions then, and we had a total of 2,400 Cadets.

Which is almost half the size of today's Corps. But inter-murder was a good experience. It kept us physically fit, because we were real couch potatoes. But there was no TV until I think my First Class year, the First Class Club had a postage-stamp-size TV, which really wasn't worth the effort.

Interviewer:

Now, as you progressed through West Point and you began to think about things like Branching, what were the top two or three for you as far as what Branch did you want to go?

Lou Gross:

Well, I wanted Air Force, but Engineers was next, and Armor was after that. But I was high enough in the class so I was able to choose Engineers, which went out first. I don't think it's that way today. I think now Armor or Infantry goes out first.

Interviewer:

Right. Why do you suppose that is?

Lou Gross:

Well, today, most of the Cadets are knowledgeable - far more knowledgeable than I was or we were - about world affairs. And if you're going to go into the Army, why, you want to go where the action is, and the mission of the Engineers is to support the Infantry. Well, why not be in the Infantry and get supported?

Interviewer:

That makes sense. Tell me a little bit about your graduation.

Lou Gross:

Well, graduation was a very memorable experience. It was West Point is a great place to be from, and we looked forward to leave, and going to our, in my case, Engineer Basic. Then I opted to go into the 82nd Airborne Division, so I'd go to Jump School at Benning, and then go to Fort Gregg, and then probably a year after graduation, I would go to my first assignment overseas. I selected Austria because my mother was born there, and I thought I would like to go to Europe.

But they had an excess of Engineer Officers in Europe, so they sent me to the closest alphabetically listed post in Alaska, and I was there for two years. I got married the day I left, and we drove cross-country and got on a MAC flight in Seattle, and arrived at Elmendorf Air Force Base, and I was stationed at Fort Richardson. And of course, they had not received the paperwork that we filled out indicating that I was married, so they changed my assignment.

They were going to send me to an island in the Bering Sea to support the Army Security Agency that had a listening post and a garbage collection station, to see what the Soviets were doing and discarding. So instead of going there I went to Ford Richardson, and they had a full complement of Officers in the 42nd Engineer Battalion, so I became the Assistant S3. The 42nd Engineer Battalion was rotated back from Korea, and they were waiting to get out.

A more demoralized, unhappy group of troops you would never find. They were all craftsmen in a Construction Battalion, and the troops lived in quonset huts. In the wintertime, the ice would build up on the inside wall of the quonset hut, and by March, it was maybe six inches thick.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Lou Gross:

And we had space heaters that were tended to by the guy that drew orderly duty, and I lived with my wife in the three-bedroom house that was six units attached, and it was heated from the Post power plant. My car finally arrived about three months after I did, and you'd have a head bolt heater that they'd unscrew one of the head bolts on the engine, put the heater in, and there was like a hitching post outside your quarters where you plug it in, so that it would keep the oil flowing. Otherwise it would be too viscous and you couldn't drive it.

I was there for two years, and it was an interesting experience. But Alaska was just an extra in the military at that point. It was a stopping-off point for the Second Armor Division, for example, who also came in fully staffed, and the few of us - I had a few classmates at that time who were stationed there with me. We did various jobs. I refereed basketball, and I coached the Regimental Basketball Team.

It was a very superfluous kind of existence I had. After I had my three years in the service - we only had a three-year obligation at the time - I put in my resignation.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Lou Gross:

And I remember General Mudgett, whoâ€™s the Commander of USARAL -

Interviewer:

And thatâ€™s U.S. Army Alaska, right?

Lou Gross:

Right.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Lou Gross:

He was a two-star General who had two Regiments, and that was his Army. He called me into his office and said he didnâ€™t take command of this Division to have his Regular Officers resign. Where would I like to go? And I said, â€œNew York City, sir.â€ And I had orders to leave in 24 hours, assigned to Headquarters, North Atlantic Division, U.S. Corps of Engineers, on Irving Place in the southern part of Manhattan, near City Hall, and I and my wife left. I gave my car and all my household furnishings, because we had been there two years, to my classmate Nick Barnes to sell or give away, and I was gone.

When I arrived at - I still had a few months to go. I arrived at the Corps of Engineers offices. Here again, I was assigned to the Corps of Engineers had some boats that collected garbage in New York Harbor, and a few other fire boats and other boats that are used for ceremonies where they spray their hoses in the air. And I was assigned to inspect them and take care of that. I did that for a couple of months, and then they needed someone in the Estimating Division.

So I was assigned to estimate government construction according to a formula that was devised by the Corps of Engineers. And I did that until I came up to June 8th, and I said, â€œGood-bye.â€ I got a job actually with my father-in-law to start. He had a business making TV antennas. This was 1957, and the TV market and technological development was not what it is, and I was there. We then went into the heat-sealing manufacture.

We would heat-seal, heat-join difficult thermoplastics, â€˜cause the plastics industry was just beginning. I worked there and managed it, and I was there for ten years and my father-in-law said, â€œKnock your brains out. Iâ€™m going to Florida.â€ And I was there for 20 more years, and we developed a niche business in the packaging and plastics machinery business.

Interviewer:

So what is a heat seal?

Lou Gross:

Well, packaging uses - you have thin polyethylene, and we would make machinery that would heat-join it. We worked on oxygenators; the original heart-lung machine used a thin Teflon film that was permeable to oxygen. But it had to be sealed into a bag in order to be utilized; you had to put valves in it. And we made machinery that did that. Here again, it was the beginnings of an industry. Gas sterilization; we made the machine that sealed the bags closed.

And then it would be, the bag would be permeable to poison gas that would sterilize what was in it, and that replaced steam sterilization for hospital operating instruments.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Lou Gross:

In other words, instead of having a surgical nurse lay out an array of instruments for an

appendectomy, sheâ€™d just tear the top off a bag and pour them out, and the surgeon would have what he would need. So we made machinery to do the job. Others were converting it. But it was a constant challenge, but it was a niche business that was very interesting, and kept me fully occupied.

Interviewer:

It sounds like a lot of innovation, and a lot of good engineering.

Lou Gross:

Yes. Yes. And then in the 1990s, along came the Chinese, and anything we could do, they could do it about 10% of the cost. I had a factory in Brooklyn with 50 employees, and slowly but surely, the market that we were able to satisfy was taken over by imports. I thought I would never retire, but in 1999, I retired.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, you had the ability to get your practical engineering license through the Army, right?

Lou Gross:

Well, no. When I started in the civilian industry, I discovered that engineering as taught at West Point was really a cursory study of engineering. I was by no means an engineer.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Lou Gross:

So I wound up going to Columbia School of Engineering nights, weekends, during the summer, and I got a masterâ€™s degree in industrial engineering. Then I went for another degree in professional engineering, and I took the P.E. Exam from New York State, so I am a P.E. and an M.S. and an I.E., and with a subway token, thatâ€™ll get you a ride. But it helped me in my activities, and it gave me a very much clearer understanding of what the engineering world was.

Interviewer:

And in the meantime, your family was growing, right?

Lou Gross:

Yes. I have four children. I have one child that was born shortly after we came back from Alaska, and then we adopted three additional children, which was an experiment. It worked out pretty well. I have my daughter is a PhD clinical social worker; she teaches at Emory University, and she teaches the only compulsory course for scientists and MDs: grant-writing. If youâ€™re going to graduate from Emory, you have to know how to write a grant, because how else would you tap all the money thatâ€™s out there?

And she has a private practice where she works with many foreign countries, actually. The Socialist Republic of Georgia is a sister organization with the State of Georgia, and she teaches them how to access the tremendous funds that are available from the various billionaire donors. My other daughter is an M.S.W., a social worker. She lives in New Jersey and has three boys. My other daughter has three girls. One of my sons has four children, two boys, two girls.

And the other son, who lives in - I keep saying Alaska, but - Vermont, he has three girls. So weâ€™ve populated the country pretty well.

Interviewer:

Thatâ€™s good. Now, youâ€™ve continued to give back to West Point throughout your life, correct?

Lou Gross:

Well, after I retired, I realized that I didnâ€™t have enough to keep me busy. And while I served on the school board, my local Hewlett-Woodmere School Board for three years, until it drove me crazy. I served as the President and Chairman, and still Chairman, of a Head Start program that served children in Brooklyn, where I grew up, and thatâ€™s an

interesting play in the demographics of Brooklyn. Where originally it serviced the traditional Jewish community, then it serviced the Afro-American community, the Hispanic community, then the Asian community.

And now we service the Polish community, in that the Polish immigrants who have come to this country have settled in Greenpoint, and that's right near Brooklyn, where I grew up.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Lou Gross:

And that took up one day a week. But with my friend Herb Lichtenberg, we decided we would become active at West Point. We went up and met General Christman, who was happy to have us, and we told him we wanted to help. He simply said, "All right. You tell me what you want to do, and I'll tell you if it's okay, and then you go ahead and do it." And we enlisted Lew Zickel from the class of '49, and we became the three amigos.

Interviewer:

And so you were working closely with the Superintendent -

Lou Gross:

Yes, with the Sup. And Herbie took care of the athletic end of it, I worked with the religious community, and Lew Zickel worked with the academic community.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Lou Gross:

And we did a variety of things. One of the earliest projects we began, in about the year 2000, was building housing for the coaches. Herbie in working with Greenberg was the Athletic Director, and they decided that that was what they really needed the most. We undertook to build the houses. Herbie was in charge of fund raising, I was in charge of construction, and Lew Zickel kept me honest. We started with one house.

And eventually, we've just completed the 18th house.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Lou Gross:

And we have 18 - well, we have 17 3-bedroom 3,000 square foot houses, and the Athletic Director's house is much larger. So we built 18 houses.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Lou Gross:

And they are fully occupied, and they provide a very good incentive to attract a coach, because the Army does not pay like civilian universities. If you want to develop top teams, you have to have good coaches. The football team is in a world by itself, but there, too, they are severely challenged. I don't believe the Football Coach makes 20% of what a top coach makes of the teams that we compete with. We did a number of other jobs. We repaired the floor in the Catholic Chapel.

The Army acquired 2 99-year leases from the New York Diocese on the Catholic Chapel to eliminate the civilian priests who couldn't get along with the Military Chaplains. And we repaired the floor. At the final negotiation there was some discussion about having the Diocese pay for repairing the floor, and Cardinal Cooke said, "Well, why do you think we're leasing it to you?" And my friend Herbie said, "We'll repair the floor." And we got the architect who did the Jewish Chapel to inspect the Catholic Chapel, and he determined that it was not too big a job, so we hired - I hired - a contractor. And we had a very tight schedule, because there are lots of weddings scheduled for the short break, and we had to be in at a certain date and out by a certain date, and we were successful.

Interviewer:

All right. Now, when you ripped up the floor -

Lou Gross:

We went right down to the base rock, and we found some whiskey bottles and some other junk. Then the contractor put in a galvanized steel floor, and then poured eight inches of concrete over that, and then put the blue stone back in place. We were able to restore it to everyone's satisfaction.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, to go back to the coaches' housing for just a minute, most of that is right up next to where the hospital is.

Lou Gross:

Yes, across the way from the hospital.

Interviewer:

When you were a Cadet, what was in that area. Do you remember?

Lou Gross:

There was an Enlisted Men's Club, and woods.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Lou Gross:

Nothing.

Lou Gross:

All right, and so they tore all that down, and then that paved the way -

Lou Gross:

Yes. The Enlisted Men's Club had been closed and moved, and they determined that that was where we would start. We thought we'd build one house, and we did, and we put the Basketball Coach in it. He lived there for about five or six years, until he self-destructed and left. And then we got another Basketball Coach, who left. Now we have the third Basketball Coach in that house. We gradually, as money became available, the class of 1955 agreed to sponsor the housing, and they raised \$750,000.00. The total job cost around \$8 million.

So we got some money from the Super Fund. We got some money from the Army Athletic Association. DPW did a lot of the infrastructure work. And we completed the area just recently, and we should have a dedication pretty soon. The class of '55 also sponsored the Tennis Center, the Lichtenberg Tennis Center, which is named in honor of my friend Herbie's father, which is a pretty good trick to get as a class project. But Herbie's older brother was the class of '51, Alan Lichtenberg, who had won a Silver Star in Korea.

And the class of '55 went along with the deal, and we put the Gross Sports Center right next to the Tennis Center.

Interviewer:

And that is the home of Army Gymnastics, right?

Lou Gross:

Yes, Army Gymnastics. Actually, when the government approved the Arvin Gym, it was a much higher building, and the Congress, in their inimitable wisdom, inspected the site and determined that they should get rid of the top floor and save some money. They got rid of the top floor. They never saved any money. But that was where the Gymnastics Center was going to be. Again, General Christman suggested that they really needed a Sports Center, or we called it an Olympic Center, for the Gymnastics team.

And by the time the succeeding General Lennox was there, we built the Sports Center, which we named the Gross Sports Center. And it serves as a home for the Gymnastics Team, and they've won a tremendous number of accolades for the building. And it's allowed the Gymnastics Coach to attract some very promising athletes.



Interviewer:

Right.

Lou Gross:

In that there are many schools that concentrate on gymnastics, and we've been able to lure a few of their prime candidates away. We've also used that Sports Center for a Gymnastics Center for the post children -

Interviewer:

Right.

Lou Gross:

In the evenings and in the afternoons, and the Gross Sports Center is well known. I remember General Huntoon, who was the previous Sup, telling me that he doesn't know why more Cadets know the name of Lou Gross rather than General Huntoon. And I said, "Well, if you're an enlisted man or an Officer who comes home in the evening, and he wants to spend some time with his kids, he takes them to the gymnastics class. And where do they go? They go to the Gross Center. General Huntoon is up there in that ivory castle; nobody sees him."

Interviewer:

Right. And two of my daughters did gymnastics at the Gross Center.

Lou Gross:

I feel that that was one of the most worthwhile things that we did. But we built that separate from the Corps of Engineers, and they followed our technique for construction at the Academy, in that after the Gross Center, the construction was handled by the AOG, who would hire a contractor and get civilian expertise, and have the DPW supervise and ride herd and ensure compliance. But the Tennis Center was built by the Corps of Engineers supervised the construction.

And the head of DPW at the time decided on changes in the plans, and New York District Engineer decided on changes in the plans. So you had seven tennis courts next to each other a few hundred feet long, with a metallic roof with no expansion joints. And as a result, in the summer, the roof would expand, in the winter it would contract, and it would shear the rivets. DPW's solution to that was to get a keg of rivets, and every year they would replace the rivets. And when they neglected to do that, we'd have leaks.

They also decided to put a masonry structure at the center of the building and attach it to this pre-fab steel structure, which also made for leaks. So we took the burden away from the New York District Engineer, and we have the AOG now does it, and Colonel Todd Browne, who is the head of Academy Advancement, started doing that. Now he retired, and he was moved upstairs in the Herbert Hall Building, and he now works for the AOG, and he does that job full-time. And they have built many structures since then. There's the Rugby Center. They're building a Lacrosse Center.

All first-class, with competent engineering background.

Interviewer:

Right. Tell me a little bit about the Jewish Chapel project.

Lou Gross:

Well, the Jewish Chapel was a project that I became involved in 11 years after graduation. In 1965 I got a call from Herbie Lichtenberg, who's the class of '55, who I'd known as a Cadet at West Point. I hadn't seen him in 11 years, and he called me on the phone. He said, "Louie, we're going to build the Jewish Chapel at West Point. I want you to come to a meeting in New York City over Luchow's on 14th Street," and I did. There we had about 20 assorted dreamers - guys who wanted to build a Jewish Chapel at West Point. There were Jewish graduates; there were Jewish non-graduates. Jack Murphy, Black Jack Murphy from Staten Island, who was a Congressman, the class of 1950 First Captain, was there, and a number of other guys, mostly from the class of '50,

â€ˆ49, â€ˆ51. Jewish, non-Jewish, interested people who felt there should be a Jewish Chapel at West Point. We had a Chairman, Mert Singer from the class of â€ˆ38, who was the Chair, and we would meet every month, and this went on for a few years.

Mert Singer relocated to Texas, and a fellow namedâ€ˆ|Herb Ames became our Chairman. Not that he was elected, but he was 4F, he had a withered left arm, never served in the military, and his business was building breweries all over the world. And he lived in Long Island and he assumed the leadership. And most of us being graduates, we took orders very, very well, and we formed committees to raise funds. We were incorporated in New York State, and we were a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

We commenced raising funds to build a Jewish Chapel at West Point. We thought we would need \$1 million. About five years into the project, we discovered that we needed \$2 million. A year later, we needed \$3 million.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Lou Gross:

A few years later, we increased our horizon and we needed \$7 million. We were able to elicit, survive, or attract our angel, who was Marty Silverman, who was a professional philanthropist. He had been drafted into World War II as an Infantryman. He wound up in Pattonâ€™s Third Army, and he won a battlefield commission and he came out as a Major, and he was assigned to the Nuremberg Trials because he was a lawyer. He left the Army after that, and he opened up a leasing business.

In those days, leasing was unheard of, and he got bank credit and started leasing to many small businesses started by veterans who came out of the Army without the capital to start a business. But for \$1.00 now and \$1.00 later, he did very well, and a few years later, the Wall Street changed the law and allowed his small leasing firm to go public. He took all his chips and cashed out, and became a professional philanthropist.

He and his wife and his son and a nephew ran a business of giving away money. He came to one of our meetings, and after telling us how wonderful it was to build a Jewish Chapel, because he had served in the military, and he realized the need for a Jewish Chapel.

Finally Herb Ames said, â€ˆWhat is your pleasure?â€ He says, â€ˆIâ€™ll give you a million dollars,â€ and we knew we were in business. We started in earnest pursuing leads. And some time a few years later, in about 1983, â€ˆ82, we approached the Army for the right of entry.

We met in Washington with the Corps of Engineers, Department of the Army, the Superintendent, and we gave them our pitch. They said, â€ˆWell, how much money do you have?â€ And we said, â€ˆWell, we have a million dollars in cash, and we have \$6 million in pledges.â€ And one of the Colonels says, â€ˆWhatâ€™s a pledge?â€ And we explained to him that Jewish fund raising works on pledges. You get a pledge from an individual for an amount. A year later, you might get 10% of what he pledged. When the job is completed, you might get 50%.

A few years later, youâ€™ll get the rest of the money. The Army wouldnâ€™t buy that. But Marty Silverman was there, and Marty said, â€ˆWell, would you take a guarantee from a New York commercial bank?â€ And they went into a huddle, and they came out and said, â€ˆNo, we need the money. But weâ€™ll consider the pledge,â€ and they assigned someone to meet with Mary to review the progress of the pledge. Marty says he never raised the funds, but the Army went along with it, and allowed us to build the building, and Marty advanced the money. We needed about \$3 million when it was completed to get the right of entry.

And Marty advanced it, and we paid him back about \$1 million. He insists that he made it all back in the stock market. However, thatâ€™s how come the Jewish Chapel was built.

Interviewer:

So why was that necessary? Where did the Jewish Cadets meet?

Lou Gross:

Well, I got involved because I felt that there should be some physical monument to the contribution of the Jewish American to the military exploits of the United States. Right or wrong, it's my country. And I felt there should also be a haven for Jewish Cadets to assist them through what I felt was a rather trying Plebe year, and three kind of isolated subsequent years. Of course, the world has changed since then. Plebes go on weekends, and everybody has a car, and it runs like Annapolis now, so.

But in those days, we felt in 1982 it was a marked improvement. Actually, a few years prior to that, a group of lawyers brought suit to eliminate compulsory military, compulsory chapel attendance at the Military Academies, and the government never opposed it, and compulsory Jewish services ended. So no longer at 8:00 every Sunday morning would the Cadets form up and march to the old Cadet Chapel on the cemetery for Jewish services. As a Plebe, I remember taking down the cross and putting up the tablets, and we would have a Reformed Jewish rabbi who came up. He was a Bird Colonel in his Cavalry boots and dress blues to conduct Jewish military services. And we sang "The Star-Spangled Banner," and "Nearer, My Country, To Thee," and he read poetry to us, and we did some English prayers. Then we adjourned for the Mess Hall for breakfast. But now we had our own Chapel.

Interviewer:

What's your favorite part of that building? It's a fabulous building, but being so involved in the creation of it, what's your favorite aspect of that building?

Lou Gross:

The Jewish Chapel? I would say the sanctuary that will seat 200 people, and it was modeled after the Cadet Chapel. The architect was Mark Abrams, who did a lot of work in Albany and in New York City, in Lincoln Center. And he modeled the Military Gothic architecture after the Cadet Chapel. And I remember in discussing where it would be located, the Army specified a rock quarry.

Which really wasn't a rock quarry; it was a dump on Merritt Road, between the Cadet Chapel and the Catholic Chapel. And the limitations on the height was that if you drew a line from the top of the Catholic Chapel, the spire, to the top of the Cadet Chapel, and had a plane parallel to the ground, our building could not pierce that plane. So it was not a commanding structure, but it fit right in with the three chapels along that road.

And I remember General Christman cleared a lot of the trees, much to the chagrin of a lot of the tree-huggers, so that the chapels would be visible from the Reviewing Stand on The Plain. The Chapel I believe was an accomplishment that somehow I can't believe that we really did it. It was a job for the dreamers, and we had our bumps in that the tower walls had to be torn down and reconstructed.

Because Tishman, who was our Contract Manager - and we had a graduate who lived in a trailer on-site - was asleep at the switch, and the tower walls were put up without the required stainless steel ties tying them into the steel-reinforced concrete. As a result, we had roof leaks for about five years. We had to go to court for two years, and finally we had to get a contractor during General Christman's time who tore down the old walls and put them up correctly. But the Chapel is very well-used. There is a never-ending contingent of military.

Foreign military - mostly Israeli. Junior Officers, Senior Officers. Those who come through to work with TRADOC. They are constantly coming through the Jewish Chapel. We get many of the Muslim visitors who come by to see the Jewish Chapel.

Interviewer:

Now, interestingly - so you've worked on the Catholic Chapel. You've built the Jewish Chapel. Are there any other chapels that

Lou Gross:

Well, we did some work on the Post Chapel.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Lou Gross:

And we renovated a Building 147 for use as a Cadet Youth Activities Center - well, not the Cadet, but the Post Youth Activities Center. And we had to change the name because originally it was Cadet Youth Activities Center - Cadet Religious Activities Center, which would be CRAC House, and we had to change it to the Post Religious Center.

Interviewer:

Okay. And that's that white building next to ODIA, correct?

Lou Gross:

Yes. That's next to the gingerbread house. It had been built in the 1800s, and it served as a bakery and then a residence. And it had been vacant for a number of years, and Colonel McChrystal approached me and suggested that that would be a project that would really like to have. And we decided, Herbie said yes, he could raise the funds for that, and I undertook to find contractors who would satisfy the State Historical Preservative Authority, SHPO, with not destroying the landmark status of the building.

And we converted it at a cost of about \$150,000.00, which Herbie was able to raise from Marty Silverman, his family, and other interested contributors. The bottom two floors we used for meeting halls for youth activities, and the top floor was used for a mosque, for the Muslim Cadet, the Cadet Muslim, the West Point Muslim Cadet Association. They set that up as a mosque, with all their paraphernalia and rugs and whatever else is necessary. I was in it once, and I was taken by the actual layout, and the attention to detail, and the splendor of the room. It's not a well-publicized fact that they converted that floor for the Muslim Cadets, and there is maybe five or six American Muslim Cadets and about 20 other foreign Cadets who come for two or three years. Normally they are from Israeli, from countries surrounding Israel in the Middle East.

And much of them, many of them are royalty. In fact, a few years ago, we had a princess who came up as a Cadet. It was kind of difficult for the Commandant to accommodate her, but they managed. We've had some visiting Muslim dignitaries who the Chaplains show the Muslim area to, and they are rather shocked when they learn, when they're told that it was built by Jews for the Muslims. But we felt it was necessary, and we went along with the use of the building. Not that we had much to say about it.

Our job was to build it, and they would dispose of it. We did that in many little things, like the old Cadet Chapel. Herbie's brother was married in the old Cadet Chapel, and we got his children to pay for refurbishing the floor and the benches according to SHPO's instructions. We were not allowed to take all the cracks and bang marks out of the wooden benches because it would destroy the realism.

But we compromised with SHPO. We did the windows. We bought an organ. I bought an organ from Vassar and installed half the pipes in the Cadet Chapel. Some were supposed to go to the Catholic Chapel, and others were supposed to go to the old Cadet Chapel. That was done. We were involved in a variety of projects, and we continued that activity until Herbie died six years ago. But I have continued my association with some of the projects that we had started.

The Gross Center, the Tennis Center, where we provide some money for equipment. We augment their budgets. We do things that appropriated funds don't cover. I'm still involved; I'm not the Chairman Emeritus of the West Point Jewish Chapel Fund that provides money for various activities at West Point that we feel should be supported. I ran it for 15 years on my own, with a very agreeable board, and I have 25 graduates and two non-graduates.

Herbie's son has taken over as Treasurer, and is the prime mover now, and we have 25 members of a board who meet semi-annually, or sometimes three times a year. We do - when we built the Jewish Chapel, we gave it to the government, and they were supposed to maintain it. And they do maintain it in accordance with their ability, and like many other government buildings, it finds itself wanting. We maintain it in tip-top fashion, so we pay for many things that the government does not. The government has assigned a Jewish Community Chaplain to West Point.

He services the Cadets as well as the Jewish community in Orange County. However, we're concerned that as they cut back on the strength - the Army strength is 495,000 today. This coming year they're going to find room to cut 40,000. It reminds me of 1957, when I left the service. The Army was giving Captains and Majors stipends to go to college to get master's degrees in teaching, or engineering, or accounting, or law, because there weren't going to be any more wars, so why did you need a large military service? Today, the same geniuses have decided the Army is too big. 495,000, and maybe 20,000 civilian contractors are sufficient. So they have to cut, and if you cut that many from the Army, I don't think the Chaplaincy is going to have a priority status, nor will the DPW, the Department of Public Works, and they will just fall further behind. So we're considering that, and we have some money.

And we discuss what has to be done with Matt Talaber, who is the head of DPW. He's the Post Engineer, and we assist him in doing what has to be done to keep our building, although the government owns it, in tip-top shape.

Interviewer:

Sir, you've spent about another full career dedicated to helping West Point grow, and much of the way West Point looks now is thanks to you and your two friends, with all the different facilities that you've either refurbished or helped to create. Why is West Point important enough to you for you to do that?

Lou Gross:

Well, I believe West Point is a gem. It provides a possibility for anyone who is interested in bettering himself and serving his country a way, regardless of financial affairs, birth, previous commitment, ancestry - it provides a means for an individual to improve himself while serving his country. And I feel it's a very valuable and necessary institution.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And you mentioned that you and your two friends, you referred to yourself as the three amigos. One of them -

Lou Gross:

Lew Zickel, class -

Interviewer:

He did academics. Herbie Lichtenberg did -

Lou Gross:

Athletics.

Interviewer:

Sports, and you did religion.

Lou Gross:

Religious.

Interviewer:

So three important pillars. That's a wonderful thing, that the three of you could each focus on different pillars of the development to -

Lou Gross:

Well, it goes to show you. Like the coaches' houses, we got \$750,000.00 from the class of '55, who are the class sponsor, and the project for these 18 houses cost \$8 million. So we were able to reach out, and many other people cooperated. And we presented ideas

that many times eluded the military, and even the collective civilians at West Point. Herbie and I and a guy who worked for Herbie named Carl Goldstein, sponsored The Night of the Generals, and The Night of the Colonels.

At a New York steak house, we would bring the Generals and Herbie's sales staff for dinner. And it would give them an opportunity to meet each other. And you have the Sup, the Com, and the Dean, and the Chairmen of many Departments meeting on an informal basis, where they never had that opportunity at West Point. We felt that that was important, and we found that the Superintendents went along with us. Then we got the Night of the Colonels, and we get about two dozen Bird Colonels who never spoke to each other at West Point for an informal evening at a steak house in New York City.

Of course, we hired a limo to bring them down, and on the way back, the limo lost a wheel, and we had an exciting year one year. But it was a very worthwhile effort, and we were delighted that we had the opportunity to do this; and it did not take that much money or time or effort, but it was just presenting an idea. For example, the march-back today at the end of Plebe year, Beast Barracks, before the Plebes join the Companies.

They march back from Buckner, they have their 15-mile trek overnight. And we instituted - my friend Herbie wrote the Superintendent every year, starting with General Graves and then General Christman, to do something with the graduates to bring them back for a weekend. And nobody thought anything of it. They would correspond with them and tell them all the drawbacks, and finally he said, "Well, how about march back, meet at the ski lodge, and march into the Reviewing Stand with the new Plebes?" And General Christman thought it was a good idea.

He presented it to the Tactical Department, and as he told us, to a man, they rejected it, for various reasons. It would minimize the importance of training. And finally, General Christman, who is no wallflower, said, "You see these three stars? We're having it. We're doing it." And the Tactical Department said, "Yes sir," and they implemented, and it's taken off today and it's a tradition today. Nobody knows why or where it came from, but it came from Herbie's letters to General Christman.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Lou Gross:

And that's what we delighted in; in having a good idea that would benefit the Corps, that would benefit the Academy, that would be adopted.

Interviewer:

It's funny, because I had just written down my next question for you, and through all the things you've said, you're an idea man. You and your friends are dreamers. So what's your next big idea or your next dream for the Academy?

Interviewer:

Well, fortunately, when General Lennox was Sup, he managed to apply for modern equipment, and it's now there. The Army has supported the Barracks construction very well, and that has to do a lot with the military-industrial complex, which we won't talk about. But my hope for the Academy is that it continues, and it keeps up with modern tradition, modern educational technique.

And it teaches current educational methods and subjects, rather than the way I was taught. We were taught about how to fight the last war, and we learned it very well. I mean I still remember Napoleon's campaigns. I never knew where the Middle East was, except for the State of Israel. I never knew Central Asia. It didn't exist. But you go up there today, and they teach foreign languages. They teach Arabic. The Jewish Chaplain teaches a Hebrew course for the Department of Foreign Languages. He taught Elementary Hebrew, and this last year he's been teaching Advanced Hebrew.

I mean that's the Army is getting bigger bang for its bucks, because he gets paid as a

Chaplain, and the Academic Department gets a freebie. They pay the Arabic Instructor very well. And I'm pleased with the way the Academy is growing, and I think we've done our part, and I look forward to the next generation continuing. Undoubtedly, in the next 20 years there'll be much more that has to be done, and I know it will be done.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Well sir, thank you for your time. This has been a fascinating interview, and thank you for inviting us to your house to do this with you today.

Lou Gross:

Thank you very much. It's an honor to be here and to do this.

Interviewer:

Thank you, sir.