

Interviewer:

Good afternoon. Today is 26 October 2015, and I'm here in the Center for Oral History with Mrs. Frances Hesselbein. Welcome, ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

Thank you. I feel so welcome, and I'm so honored to be with you.

Interviewer:

Thank you, ma'am. Could you please spell your last name for us?

Frances Hesselbein:

H-E-S-S-E-L-B-E-I-N.

Interviewer:

Thank you, ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

Hesselbein, like grapevine.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am. And could you tell me a little bit about your childhood; when and where you were born, and how you grew up.

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes. I was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Frances Hesselbein:

A town with steel mills, and coal mines, and big hearts. But it was a big steel, big labor town, western Pennsylvania. I never wanted to leave Johnstown. I was determined to stay there forever. I loved it. And as I said, big steel, big coal, big hearts, and my grandfather lived nine miles away, in South Fork, Pennsylvania, and he was the Justice of the Peace until he was 97, when he was running for his last 3-year term.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Frances Hesselbein:

He played the pipe organ in the Methodist church, and had a small clothing store for men. So I loved Johnstown, and my people had been there forever.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Frances Hesselbein:

And I never wanted to leave, and was determined never to.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

When I was called to come to New York to talk about becoming the CEO of Girl Scouts of U.S.A., by that time I was married. I said to John, my wonderful husband, "I'm writing them a nice little note thanking them, but I'm not going to be interviewed because I will never leave Johnstown." Well, I did. He not only encouraged me, he drove me to New York to be interviewed, and I was offered the job, and -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Frances Hesselbein:

13 marvelous years - never had a bad day.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am. And so that was in 1976.

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Correct? Okay. Tell me a little bit about your upbringing. You mentioned your grandfather,

who was Justice of the Peace.

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes. In his living room was a small church-sized pipe organ. On the shelf above the keyboard were two beautiful ancient Chinese vases that I've written about many times, and how I learned respect for all people in that music room when I was eight years old.

Interviewer:

Okay. That's wonderful. And what did your parents do?

Frances Hesselbein:

My mother - well, in those days, mothers didn't - they worked at home. But I guess unless you were a nurse or something like that, I don't think it ever would've occurred to my mother to go outside the house. My father was one of the first four Mounted State Police Officers in the country. At that time, miners were coming from all over the world to work in the western Pennsylvania coal mines, and they were from all different ethnic groups, and they were killing each other. So at that time, the Governor of Pennsylvania founded the first State Police force in the country, and they were Mounted State Police. And my father, who had played Army football and was a big guy, he was one of the first four Mounted State Police Officers in our country or in our state. And he used to tell me wonderful stories about it. The miners would be having these terrible battles. As they galloped in to break it up, the miners were not afraid of the State Police in their big tall hats and black uniforms, and they were called the "black hussars." They weren't afraid of the police. They were afraid of the horses.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Frances Hesselbein:

So the horses were just - they would all just disappear. But I grew up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and I loved it. I was the first woman - are you prepared for this?

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

I was the first woman ever to chair a United Way campaign in our country.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Frances Hesselbein:

And there were people - men - who said, when the announcement was made, "Can women raise money?" I was permitted to have, to choose my own vice chairman, so I chose the President of the United Steel Workers, because they had never been engaged in the leadership of a United Way campaign.

Interviewer:

Right.

Frances Hesselbein:

And it turned out to be wildly successful. Bethlehem Steel had a luncheon to honor us and to kick off the campaign, and that night, AFL-CIO United Steelworkers had a big dinner for 200 to kick it off. And we had as our guest speaker the National President of AFL-CIO.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Frances Hesselbein:

So by engaging corporate Johnstown as well as the unions and labor, we had the highest per capita giving of any United Way in the country that year.

Interviewer:

What year was that?

Frances Hesselbein:

It would've been - I think it would've been the year before I came to New York.

Interviewer:

Okay, so â€˜75?

Frances Hesselbein:

Around â€˜75, â€˜74.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Frances Hesselbein:

Andâ€¦but theyâ€™d never had a woman, for heavenâ€™s sake. A woman chair? It was a marvelous place to grow up, and I never wanted to leave it.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Frances Hesselbein:

But I did.

Interviewer:

How did you get involved with the Girl Scouts, maâ€™am?

Frances Hesselbein:

I was the mother of a little boy, and I didnâ€™t know anything about little girls, and a very energetic woman who was the neighborhood chairman of the Girl Scouts kept finding me and insisting that I become a Leader. And I told her, â€œIâ€™m sorry. I know nothing about little girls. Iâ€™m a mother of a little boy, and I donâ€™t have time.â€ Finally one day she caught me at a weak moment and said, â€œI have 30 little girls in the basement of the Second Presbyterian Church, and weâ€™re going to have to disband the Troop, because the Leader is gone to Australia to be a missionary. Isnâ€™t that tragic; 30 little girls?â€ And I said, â€œWell, Iâ€™ll take them for six weeks, and weâ€™ll find a real Leader.â€ And as I said, we stayed together until they were all graduating from high school, and I still see several of them come to see me, and they areâ€¦itâ€™s just amazing to think how long ago. From then I was asked to do several local Leadership Council jobs, and one day I found myself in New York City, being interviewed for the CEO job of the national organization, Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., with 750,000 Leaders and board members, and 2,300,000 girls.

And I had no intention of going, but I was trying to be polite, and John insisted that I go. And during the interview, I think they could tell that I was not - I was being polite. That I was not eager. So one of them said, â€œWell, Frances, if you were in this job, what would you do?â€ Well, because I wasnâ€™t leaving Johnstown, I could be very open, and I talked about the total transformation of Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. I said, â€œWe would train our people, and we would go out, and we would bring girls and Leaders from all five racial-ethnic groups.

We would throw out the old 12-year-old handbooks, that were filled with recipes and cooking and hiking, and find four marvelous educators, who would write four new handbooks with lots of math, science, technology. And we would be very global.â€ So I came out and my husband was waiting. He had driven me to New York. He said, â€œHowâ€™d it go?â€ I said, â€œOh, I had the best time, John. I really described - I scared them to death, but I described the transformation that we require for the future.â€ And next day they called, said, â€œWe want you to come.â€

And because they had all been there, and they had bought this vision of the future, there was no push-back. They were all part of it. So the Girl Scouts totally transformed the organization, and we were the largest organization of girls and women in the whole world. But because they bought it, they were all part of it, and we had all kinds of remarkable support all over.

Interviewer:

Thatâ€™s phenomenal. So youâ€™ve lived your whole life being a leader.

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And a pioneer.

Frances Hesselbein:

I never, never - growing up, all I wanted to do was write poetry. And when I was married and had a little boy, all I wanted to do was be a wonderful wife and a wonderful mother. I don't know what happened along the way, but - well, I had a husband who cheered me on, and if I didn't want to open a door, he opened it for me; and it was a remarkable journey.

Interviewer:

So in your whole life, across the span of your lifetime here, what are some of the big changes you've seen in leadership?

Interviewer:

In the language and the concept. Do you remember when they talked about leadership, there was a pyramid like this, and on top of it was a little guy standing? I think we got rid of the pyramid. Leadership became - and of course we preached this and worked on it - became circular, and the language, the old hierarchy, we threw out. No more up-down, top-bottom, superior-subordinate. Of course not. We threw all that old hierarchical language, and we moved across the organization and installed circular management, where we moved across the organizations.

Interviewer:

Now, you were a leader when many women were not leaders. What sort of challenges did you face?

Frances Hesselbein:

As the President of the Girl Scouts, or the CEO of the Girl Scouts, or in the neighborhood?

Interviewer:

Either one. Perhaps start with the neighborhood, and then work up to Girl Scouts.

Frances Hesselbein:

Well, I really can't think -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Frances Hesselbein:

Of a challenge, because we had so many, many opportunities, and it was at a time when girls and women, if you had a handbook for them, it was filled with nice recipes, and cooking was the greatest badge. I think rather than challenge I would say opportunity. And at that time - in my own community at that time, if you were my friend and black, I couldn't take you to a restaurant for lunch or dinner at that time.

And so building an organization that welcomes everyone was an opportunity - forget about challenge - because these remarkable people brought their great gifts. And when I was the CEO of the largest organization for girls and women in the whole world, and I say I never had a bad day, out of 13 years, 5,000 days. And I think because we didn't just talk.

If you visited the Girl Scout Headquarters and I walked into the room with my management team, did they all look like me? Of course not. If you looked at our board, we had a very famous judge, Constance Baker Motley, that was a board member. We had outstanding women of color and great skill and experience and reputation. And so when you unleash the power of democracy and respect for all people, and the education of all of your people is a priority.

I often think of today in our own country. We look back at the beginning of the country and there were really two institutions that sustained the democracy in the beginning years: United States Army and public education. Go fast forward to today's world, when the greatest challenges are seeing that every child has an education. In New York City, one of the richest cities in the world, if you take all of the 15-year-olds, black and Hispanic teenagers, 15, boys, 1 in 900 is in school.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Frances Hesselbein:

Now, how - we don't even know this. People in New York are unaware of this. So you tell them, "1 out of 900 is in school at 15." Now, in a democracy, you educate all of your children, so think that's one of our greatest opportunities - also greatest challenges - today, is every child has a high school diploma.

Interviewer:

And that's how you start to get change.

Frances Hesselbein:

Beg your pardon?

Interviewer:

And that is how you begin to get change in the society is -

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes. Yes. And also you start seeing people you never saw before. How do you know we have these thousands in New York City alone? Thousands of 15-year-olds on the street. 1 in 900 is in school. So if we all join the battle, and see that schools have libraries, and they are open, and that the poorest children have an opportunity to have a high school diploma. So I am devoted to those same two institutions that established our democracy. Today, I really believe these are the two institutions that sustain the democracy: the United States Army and public education, and I haven't changed.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am. And tell me a little bit about your relationship with the United States Army.

Frances Hesselbein:

Well, one remarkable inspiring experience, four years ago I was appointed to the Class of '51 Leadership Chair at West Point, and I taught there - now, I'm just five feet tall. I don't exactly look like an impressive soldier, but I taught there for two years, every other month, class of Cadets, 24 Cadets, on leadership. That was one of the most inspiring parts of my whole life, and I had a little team at West Point of Faculty members to advise me, six of them, and they sat down before my first class and, "How can we be helpful?"

And I said, "One thing I would like to do instead of teaching alone by myself with a class of Cadets every other month, I would like to bring each time a great thought leader. And we would sit side by side, knee to knee, and teach the class together, and it could be a lot more exciting for the two of us than for instance alone - exciting for the Cadets." So one of the Faculty members said, "Ahem" what kind of thought leader were you thinking of?" I said, "Well, my first would be General Lloyd Austin III, and my second would be Jim Collins, the author of "Good to Great" and my third would be Alan Mulally, the President of Ford."

They looked at me and said, one of them said, "You really think you could get General Austin to come up with you?" I said, "Yes, if he's free." Well, they decided okay, I could be different. And the two before me for two years, Coach K. of Duke, General Shinseki, graduate of West Point, and former - you know all about his marvelous career. Each of them had two years. I was the third one. Both of them are graduates of West Point. And so I never had a more inspiring two years of my life.

And the Cadets loved Jim Collins so much that when I finished my two years, Jim Collins followed me in that chair.

Interviewer:

Well, that's wonderful.

Frances Hesselbein:

I loved every minute of it. And by having a dialogue instead of a person, it unleashed the energy of the Cadets. So they just grabbed it and asked the most marvelous questions. And when I took Alan Mulally, who then was President of Ford and had transformed Ford, and was very famous for that. So we're sitting knee to knee, and I introduced him, and I said, "Alan, tell us a little bit about what you did that transformed Ford Motor Company. What was the most significant action you took?"

He yelled at me. He looks at me, and yells in this big voice, "I did not transform Ford. The people of Ford transformed Ford." Well, the Cadets loved it. They all howled and applauded, and he was a great hit. But I always laugh at that, how "I did not transform."

Interviewer:

So what leadership lessons - if you could impart some lessons to the people that serve in the Army, and the people that serve in public education, what leadership lessons would you tell them that they need to focus on?

Frances Hesselbein:

Define leadership as a matter of how to be, not how to do.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Frances Hesselbein:

It is a quality. Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do, and it is the quality and character of the leader that determines the performance results. Did you get that?

Interviewer:

It's the quality of the leader that determines performance results.

Frances Hesselbein:

Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do. It's the quality of character of the leader that determines the performance results. That's why West Point inspires me the way it does, because here, leadership - well, Duty, Honor, Country.

Interviewer:

Yes, it is. And so then it's also a product of shaping the character of the graduate, right, to -

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes. If leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do, then it is quality and character of the leader that determines results. And that means that you can articulate the qualities you believe a leader must have, but then you have to live them. So as you define leadership, you cannot just speak. You have to live those qualities. And I always feel that no matter where you are, to be a true leader, successful leader, you have to be mission-focused, values-based, and demographics-driven.

So we manage the mission, we manage for innovation, we manage for diversity. That's it - three. And Peter Drucker was part of us when we were developing everything, and Peter, we made a poster. And the quote it uses, his words for the same concept, Mr. Drucker's, on values-based, demographics-driven, these three steps to leadership. And he said, "No, no, no, there are five steps," after we had produced gorgeous posters with the three.

He said, "No. Then number four is if we've answered those three, you say, 'What have been our results?' Number four. Then number five, because of these four, 'What is our plan?'" Then he would smile and say, "If you do all of this work, and you don't come out with a plan, then a good time was had by all, but that is all." Peter Drucker.

Interviewer:

Yes, it is. Now, a few minutes ago you mentioned that the Army and public education are very important to the American democracy. Could you touch on the connection between the U.S. Army and democracy?

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes. We were able to have a democracy because in 1776 we were determined that this was our country, and this was America, and so when you think of the Founding Fathers, who sat around the table, as different as they were. At that time, George Washington is seated, and he has 314 slaves. Beside him was my ancestor, John Adams, who never owns a slave.

Not even one slave. Now, all of those men sat around the table; as different as they were,

they were able to build a nation. What was it, 36 or 37 years later, we fought a bitter Civil War so that we would not have slavery, and I had six members of my family who were Union soldiers, and we have a trunk of their letters. And William writes home, "Dear Mary, I know why I'm here; to save the Union and free the slaves." But that was what they said.

To each other. And when you think how hungry they were at times, and how hungry their families were. We have some touching letters from Mary and William, and Mary talks about sometimes it's so hard to find enough food. These six Pringle brothers all went, and they left wives and babies on six remote farms. So he writes, "Dear Mary, as soon as it's springtime, be sure you plant potatoes. They will be very good for you, and you can save them all winter in the dirt cellar."

Now, when we look at our wars, and we remember what happens to our families, we need to be so sensitive, so appreciative. They sustain the democracy, and have since the very beginning.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am. The soldiers and their families back home.

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes. Yes. And I've often smiled when I thought of John Adams, my ancestor, the only Founding Father who never owned a slave. That was an enormous difference, but they could, with respect, they could build a country, despite the differences.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am. Now ma'am, over the years, you've worked with a lot of Army leaders.

Frances Hesselbein:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And a lot of fairly senior leaders. Do they do a good job bridging the gap between the civil and the military?

Frances Hesselbein:

I don't see a gap. I just look at the military and I am so grateful. I love my country, and the military has sustained the democracy of my country. And so right now, when we run out of men, the men in my family have fought in every war except today, when we have no more men. I've lost my brother and my son and my husband. All of them served.

So state your question again.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am. So Army leaders, do they do a decent job of bridging across civil and military lines?

Frances Hesselbein:

Oh, I've been working in partnership with the Army for a long, long, long, long time. This pin is given by the Chief of Staff of the Army to women who serve the Army but who are not members of the Armed Forces, and so I always wear it every day. I'm so proud of it. General Wiley gave it to me. And here, of course, President Clinton. This is the Presidential Medal of Freedom, our country's highest civilian honor. And I wear it every day, and on November 22nd, President Obama invited everyone still living who had received this.

Now, 50 years ago, on November 22nd, John F. Kennedy, President Kennedy designed this. He said, "We have ways to honor the Army or the military, but we have nothing for civilians." President Kennedy designed this. He was assassinated before he could give it, but President Johnson was faithful forward, and there is just an amazing sense of history attached to this. And when 3,000 of us were in Washington November 22nd, and we, everyone who had ever received this in all those years.

We could be there with a spouse or a friend or family, and 3,000. As they called you forward, and here's President Obama, Mrs. Obama, and he chose to share the honor with President and Mrs. Clinton. So here is this long Smithsonian dining room, and in an

opening here, the two Presidents, the two First Ladies. So each one of us was called forward to shake his hand, so in the minute it took you to walk from your table to where the President was standing, they would say one sentence about you, in a big, deep voice. It was a soldier.

I moved on to Mrs. Obama and said, "Thank you for everything you are doing for the children of our men and women in the Armed Forces." She dropped my hand and kissed me on both cheeks. Hillary is next in line. "Frances." She and Bill gave me this, and we've done some things together from their Foundation. And she repeated, "Frances," big hug, and Bill walks over and says, "Frances," another big hug. I said, "In about two minutes I've had four of the biggest hugs I've ever had." But I thought there was something so generous about President Obama letting President Clinton share.

He didn't have to; he could've just had - he is the President. So it was very inspiring, and I kept hearing, "Proud to be an American," which is what I hear at West Point every time I am on these hallowed grounds.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am. So what does West Point mean to you?

Frances Hesselbein:

West Point says to me, in 1801 my ancestor was the President of the United States, and great leaders were building this institution. And I like to think if he was the President, he had something to do with encouraging them, "because you couldn't do it without the White House's approval, I should think. And I think 1802, the first classes. One of the things I love that most people don't know about West Point, if you read the history of West Point.

And the number of young men who apply to be accepted here in the years of our bloodiest, bloodiest wars and worst and bloodiest battles, in those years, the same number of Cadets, of young men apply to be Cadets. Now, that says something about my own country, and the men and the families -

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

Of our people.

Interviewer:

And it's interesting to me that the same year you took over leadership of the Girl Scouts is the same year that women first began attending West Point.

Frances Hesselbein:

Is that right?

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am. 1976.

Frances Hesselbein:

That must've been a good year.

Interviewer:

It was a very good year. And so the first class to graduate women graduated in 1980.

Frances Hesselbein:

Isn't that remarkable?

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

Well, I've been here many times, invited to speak to a class or be with it. There was one gathering of all the women who had ever attended were at this gathering, and it was so inspiring, the way they spoke. The early years weren't easy ones, but they're West Point graduates, and it's very inspiring.

Interviewer:



Well, thank you so much for being here with us, ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

Well, I've loved this.

Interviewer:

It's been an honor and a privilege for us to talk to you today.

Frances Hesselbein:

Well, you have my card.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

And what is it good for?

Interviewer:

To come visit you for breakfast, lunch, or coffee.

Frances Hesselbein:

That's right, and he has a card.

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

Breakfast, lunch, or coffee, yes. I have - where are the photographs? Beg your pardon?

Interviewer:

Yes. Well, thank you, ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

Yeah. I had a photograph here with the Obamas, but they're not!

Interviewer:

Yes ma'am.

Frances Hesselbein:

They're not here here. But when you come to my office, they have my card, good for - they understand what it's good for, breakfast, lunch, or coffee.

Interviewer:

Okay, we're good.