Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Iantha Sidell

SUMMARY

Iantha Sidell shares her journey from an Episcopalian upbringing in Spokane to a deep commitment to Judaism, shaped by her marriage, conversion, and decades of leadership in organizations like Hadassah and the Jewish Federation. She reflects on her pride in founding the women's division, her strong bond with Israel, and the ongoing challenge of inspiring younger generations to stay engaged in Jewish life.

Esther Kaplan: Good afternoon and welcome. My name is Esther Sharon Kaplan. I'm a member of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society archive committee, archive and research committee. Today is Monday, May 22nd, 2023. This is an oral history interview with Iantha Sidell, who has held leadership positions in multiple local and national organizations, including Campaign and Board Chair for the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle. This interview is part of a series documenting professional and lay leadership's current concerns about anti-Semitism, antisemitism, diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and Israel as well. This interview will be part of the archives of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. We're conducting this interview via zoom. Dennis Barnes is hosting and assisting with the technical parts of this interview, though he does not appear. So Iantha on a personal. On a personal note, we have been friends for many, many years celebrating our mutual birthdays, working with Hadassah and many other organizations, traveling to many conferences as well. And now I am honored to interview you on behalf of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. So let's begin this interview. Can you tell us a little bit about your family and your childhood?

Iantha Sidell: I grew up in Spokane, eastern Washington, Spokane, in an Episcopalian family. My parents both volunteered at the church. My mother taught Sunday school, but. And we did Christmas and Easter. So it was a religious home. But, um, my maiden name is Shuster. And I've always kind of felt once I started studying about Jewish being Jewish, once I started dating my future husband, that I think God gave me to the wrong schusters. But, um, I had a good childhood and small town Spokane. My parents were loving and wonderful grandparents. So now, as a grandparent, I'm trying to leave those values to my little grandchildren.

Esther Kaplan: Wonderful. So can you tell us what motivated you to convert my husband?

Iantha Sidell: My future husband. And actually, I mean, it wasn't like you have to convert to marry me. But like I said, I'd never met a Jewish person, so I started studying and reading about it. And the one on one relationship to God just really spoke to me. There are a lot of. People involved in being Christianity the father, the son, the Holy Ghost, the Pope. You know all this? The one on one relationship. It made me feel responsible for myself and my actions. It spoke to me.

Esther Kaplan: That's beautiful. Um, so when you decided to convert, what was your family's response?

Iantha Sidell: Well, my family loves my husband so much, they didn't care. They were so happy that I'd be with him. So I was very lucky that way. Um, my grandparents were quite elderly at the time, you know, in their 90s. Um, they didn't want me to tell anybody in their retirement home that I was doing that. But, you know, that's that age group, you know, so I understood that and respected them. But they were very happy for me.

Esther Kaplan: That's great. That's great. So was there any specific organization that motivated you to actively participate?

Iantha Sidell: Well, I think it was actually Hadassah. Um, I forget who I well, I knew Julie Morris, but, um, Hadassah helped me. At the time. I was a working mother, you know, even once I had children. But I was working. So to find a meeting in the evening with girlfriends, because I wanted to enlarge my group of Jewish friends, I didn't have a large group. And Hadassah really did it for me. And now, with all the public speaking I've done and the leadership roles, everything I learned, I did learn in Hadassah.

Esther Kaplan: That's beautiful. I think we met at Hadassah. We did. I think Valerie might have. Valerie Epstein might have.

Iantha Sidell: Right.

Esther Kaplan: Yeah. Been part of.

Iantha Sidell: That. Girls were in preschool together.

Esther Kaplan: Got it, got it. Um, so my question was, was there any specific organization that motivated you to actively participate? So would that have been Hadassah?

Iantha Sidell: Hadassah. Yeah.

Esther Kaplan: Mhm. Mhm. Great. Well can you tell us if you had any mentors who may have motivated you to volunteer and become a leader in so many organizations?

Iantha Sidell: Yeah, I think everything I've learned and known, I learned from Julie Morris. She was a wonderful mentor. She would live next door to my aunt and uncle and, um, she took me under her wings and and really led the way for me.

Esther Kaplan: Well, I know, so you've been involved in so many organizations, uh, like the Jewish Federation, the JCC board, Herzl Board, Friendship Circle Board, University of Washington, Jewish Studies Board, AIPAC board, and I'm sure many, many more that you can, uh, that you.

Iantha Sidell: I just can't say no.

Esther Kaplan: Okay. Got it. Um, anyhow, so, um, so once you got involved with these organizations, how did you feel? Did you feel accepted by your Jewish associates?

Iantha Sidell: Yeah, this was a very inclusive community. Always did nobody. I never felt pushed aside or or different than anybody else.

Esther Kaplan: That's wonderful. Great. So, um, a question is, since your conversion and being involved in so many Jewish organizations, have you experienced or the organization you were involved with experienced anti-Semitism?

Iantha Sidell: Not personally, but, you know, my best friend was murdered for being Jewish, one of my best friends at the Jewish Federation. So that's just I mean, that just hit me like, you know, I don't know, I had just left the building, so the timing was quite sad. So Pam wechter everything when I think, oh, I don't really want to go to this meeting, I think Pam Wechter wouldn't say that she'd get up and go, you know.

Esther Kaplan: Right, right. So yeah, that was tragic. Very tragic. So can you please describe your feelings about Israel?

Iantha Sidell: Well, yeah, I'll tell you. One thing is, I've been to Israel 35 times. It's just. And when I'm there, I feel like every cobblestone belongs to me. I feel so at home there and welcoming there. It's just. It's just a wonderful. You know, if my family and children would all make Aliya with me, we'd be there. But, you know, large family, lots of kids and grandkids. That isn't going to happen. But I go, I've been 35 times, so I love it.

Esther Kaplan: Amazing. So from all your volunteer achievements, can you share with us what you're most proud of?

Iantha Sidell: Oh, there's so many. But I think basically starting the women's division at the federation with Lucy Pruzan, she led it. I was just on her committee. But finding a place for women in a time that spoke to women. And we had backup to help with our families and children. It was, uh, it was designed for a Seattle woman, and I'm proud of that.

Esther Kaplan: That's beautiful. Um, and, uh, lastly, what do you feel the greatest challenges are for the future of our Jewish organizations?

Iantha Sidell: Getting the youth involved. You know, I'm just so thrilled that my daughter and son in law are involved. They're on

boards in the community and their children, um, are going to Hebrew school, you know, twice a week in Sunday school or whatever. They're not in Jewish day school, but that's fine. Um, but the youth, I think so many parents, a lot of people, we get a little lazy and the kids don't want to go or the kids are on basketball and baseball and homework. And I know these kids are busier than we were growing up. It's it's it's stressful for them all. But, um, if we can just get those youth, you know, in the roof and plan programs that speak to them, uh, that will ensure that they'll continue that path.

Esther Kaplan: Absolutely. Um, I thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us today. Is there anything else you would like to share with us, or about your experiences with the Jewish community? With the Federation?

Iantha Sidell: Well, I'm basically I'm just so grateful to this community for being so inclusive and and embracing me and the things I've wanted to do in the community. It wasn't like, oh, but you're a convert or you you wouldn't know from that because you didn't grow up Jewish. I haven't received anything like that. And I know people in this country have in other communities, but it's a wonderful community and we're very accepting of however Jewish you want to be.

Esther Kaplan: Well, I have admired you through the years as a friend, and you've been such a wonderful example to me and so many others in our community. Um, I just want to thank you for your time, your tireless efforts, and your much appreciated philanthropy. Todorova. Thank you so much.

Iantha Sidell: Thank you. Esther. I really appreciate your time and love you too.

Esther Kaplan: Love you.

Iantha Sidell: Bye bye.

Esther Kaplan: Bye.