Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Powered by Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle

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William (Bill) Friedman

SUMMARY

Bill Friedman is a Chicago-born physicist educated at Cornell and MIT who enjoyed a distinguished academic career, marked by decades of teaching, research, publications, and awards. After retiring, he became deeply involved with the Seattle Jewish Seniors, a vibrant community whose balance of shared identity and diverse backgrounds fostered strong bonds, intellectual engagement, and meaningful social connection until its dissolution during the COVID pandemic. Through documenting the group's history, Friedman highlights the vital role of social interaction in seniors' mental health and hopes their story will inspire future community-building efforts.

Bill Friedman has generously shared resources about his story and the Seattle Jewish Seniors group. You can view an album of scanned photographs, an activities pamphlet, and a narrative about the group and its members, written by Bill himself.

Sara Glass: I have the honor this evening of interviewing Bill Friedman, a retired professor of physics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and long time member of the Seattle Jewish Seniors. Bill also has written a history of the group, which is available on the WSJHS website. And Bill, before we get started, I need to ask for your consent to this recording. Do you consent to be recorded?

William Friedman: Yes I do.

Sara Glass: Thank you. And just so everybody knows, today is August 11th, 2025. Well, despite being one of the newest and the youngest SJS members, Bill. in 2008. was chosen to head the group's five member executive steering committee and was never replaced during the subsequent 17 years. The group was very active with a large membership and flourished for decades, but sadly has now faded away. Because of Bill's position, he was very much involved in development, decisions and activities, working with members and their partners at Temple Beth Am, which hosted SJS after about 1904 (sic). Bill. Can you please tell us some more about yourself and the SJS group?

William Friedman: Okay, I'd be happy to. Um, I was born in Chicago, Illinois on May 29th in 1938, and my parents were Bernard Friedman and his wife, Minnon Hirsch Friedman Uh, my father was a career government lawyer, and my mother was an elementary school teacher. And they both came from families that had quite a distinguished history. Uh, my father's father, my grandfather, died when my father was five years old and my mother's mother, my grandmother on that side, died when she was 15. And so they both, um, were super parents to us, two children. They had two children. And this may very well have been because of their early life experience. My sister, who's two years younger than I am, and I, along with my parents, formed a very close, um, quartet, if you want to call it that. And we, uh, were, even at an early age, did most things together. In fact, they taught the two of us as children how to play bridge so that we could play together. So, uh, that, uh, was my very early childhood, and then I completed most of my public school education in Montgomery County, Maryland, uh, where I graduated. And I modestly say it in the top 1% of my high school class of over 500 students. And then later on, I enjoyed a wonderful marriage with my high school sweetheart. Uh, but this was cut short after 45 years of marriage by cancer. And, uh, that occurred only two years after we retired to our favorite location, which is Seattle. And I had the privilege of attending, uh, some of the finest schools in the nation. This is

Cornell and MIT, and, uh, this prepared me for, uh, my subsequent work as a professor, both a researcher and a teacher. Professor of doing research in nuclear physics, which, uh, I carried out over about a 40 year period. During that period, I published probably well over, uh, 100 refereed scientific papers and a book which I co-authored with one of my doctoral students, and I gave hundreds of, uh, technical talks and received satisfying, what do you call it, professional recognition. I was able to enjoy a fascinating array of interesting experiences and travel, uh, both foreign and domestic, which actually began with a postdoctoral fellowship at the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen, Denmark. So I had a really a very satisfying and a wonderful career, which I'm very pleased to reminisce on now, my my advanced age.

William Friedman: I contacted the, uh, Washington State Jewish Historical Society. Not so much to preserve my story, but the story of the Seattle Jewish Seniors. Uh, this unique and special group had a great influence on much of the latter part of my life. And as Sara has already recommended, I would encourage you to read the details in the written comments, which I, uh, prepared now over a year ago, in which I tried to explore the factors which made the group, the Seattle Jewish Seniors so special. In my approach to that paper and subsequent thoughts, were shaped by my background as a teacher and a researcher, rather than a historian. Like historians, I really wanted to preserve the story. But as a teacher, I was also interested in transmitting knowledge for future use. As an aside, during the time that I was in Madison, I taught 20 different courses out of our catalog. I also taught at Princeton and at Michigan State University and tutored my young members in my family and neighbors. And so I had a lot of experience in teaching, and I enjoyed it. Um, as a researcher, I was interested or I always tried to explain why and how things worked, how they happened. And in my professional life, the system that I was concerned about was the atomic nucleus. But, um, for a social group, uh, of wondrous wonderful people, uh, of wonderful and a varied background. Uh, I also am trying to understand how and why this group functioned. And that's what I want to talk about. Uh, it's amazing how meaningful the group was to so many people and many of the people were committed to it and actually quite active, uh, over a period of many years. And some of the members remained active until they actually passed away. They were active up to the day they died. And others enjoyed participating until their abilities permitted uh, wouldn't permit them to continue. So it really had a big effect on a large number of people. Now, um, as with any, uh, history, the facts will remain the same. Or they may even increase with time. But as, uh, the interpretation, however, can change and evolve. And this is true of my analysis as a story, the history that was referred to earlier and written over a year ago, uh, was, um, what my thoughts were at that time. But even today and more recently, I've got a different take on this, and I feel that the success of the group lay in its balance. That is the balance between diversity and commonality. And in the previous I dealt more on the question of diversity, but now I think it's a question of balance. And as in physics, where a balance of forces leads to an equilibrium, in a group dynamics like the SJS, the current balance or the correct balance of diversity and commonality can lead to success. And that's what I want to discuss now how that happened and what this balance was. And I'll begin by saying that the apt name for our group, namely Seattle Jewish Seniors, provides a structure for this discussion of the features and the balance in three very simple words. And I want to share my examination of these three words. Seattle Jewish and Seniors. Uh, in uh, being able to, uh, make this evaluation. Now, the first word, of course, is Seattle. And as the name implies, one of the features of commonality was that all of our members, uh, were in the same general area.

William Friedman: For those of us who are new to Seattle, The SJS offered a ready made collection of local associates and new friends. And so this was a sort of a commonality of being in Seattle. But our members could be found not only in the city of Seattle, but in the surrounding area. And this diversity expanded our meetings and our activities to a wide variety of locations. And thus we benefited from that expansion. Uh, most of our members had arrived in this area, had come from previous locations and they had lived in a wide variety of different places. And this led to an interesting mix of backgrounds, which I think was important to our success. A number of our members were refugees from Nazi Europe, and they had very interesting stories to tell. So that that was part of our diversity. Many of our members ended up in Seattle for a very variety of reasons, but had lived in the same places as other members, and such places included, obviously, New York, Chicago, Boston, and major centers like that. And in that sense, there was a commonality among groups of people in our association. In my own case, I had lived in nine locations and five of those were shared by other members: Chicago, Washington or the DC area. Ithaca New York, Boston, Madison, and Michigan. So I had common links with group members who shared experiences like that. And these factors that I've just mentioned under the single word Seattle, uh, demonstrate how diversity and commonality can be associated, uh, to join together to form a successful group like our Seattle Jewish Seniors. The second word, obviously, is Jewish. And we all have the common feature of being associated with the tradition of Judaism. However, uh, we were affiliated with different congregations or even no congregations at all, and we came from different Jewish branches the Reform, the Conservative and the Orthodox. Some were observant and some had been raised and practiced very secular lives. So there was variety there even though we all had the commonality of being associated with Judaism. Most of us were Ashkenazi, but one in particular was Sephardic, one of one of our favorites. And since Seattle was a center for migration from the Ashkenazi Jews, we were all interested in the similarities and differences between these groups. As a feature shared by our group and most Jewish groups that I'm aware of, we all enjoyed food, and that's a high priority on that, uh, feature focus of many of our activities, uh, involve food. Whether they were schmoozes in each other's houses, where we served food or banquets or parties in which food was served. Or food was coupled to our other activities, like an outing which we followed by a lunch or something similar to that. So food was a commonality among our group,

but it arose in many different ways as we operated in the Seattle Jewish Seniors. And the final word is Seniors. Um, we were all seniors to some extent. I think all of us were retired. And this meant that we had a lot of time on our hands. And we this also led to a great deal of diversity since we had come from different career paths.

Sara Glass: True.

William Friedman: From, uh, different life, family life experiences. Most of us shared a keen sense of empathy because many of us, most of us, actually had suffered personal loss as we were seniors. And also this led to our being able to comfort one another and and to provide a setting of comfort for many of us. So the senior aspect then was important in that way as our work appearances were very different. Um, many of us had been in science, math in the technical field. So there was a commonality among part of us. And at one time five of us had been in physics. Actually holding university positions and one a very active physicist. Other members had been in business, education, law, medicine and the arts. And this variety then led to a richness of our brew of, uh, in our group. And that that was where variety plays a very big role. Our ages spanned range starting from the youngest around 60. And this allowed and going up. And this allowed for carpooling, helping one another and passing on wisdom as the elder members who are able to do. As a group of seniors, we also strove for ourselves to develop a full program of self enrichment, both physically, intellectually, artistically, and emotionally. And the important feature that I want to emphasize here is that we did this for ourselves. It wasn't being provided for us. It was an undertaking that we as a group did for our own benefit. To have an operation like that and to provide this kind of self enrichment required a sufficient number of people and a balance in the mix between leaders and participants. You had to have a large number of people overall, but you had to have a strong leadership group, and you had to have a strong group that were willing to participate. And at, at its prime, um, the SJS had precisely what it needed in order to be able to put together this kind of a program of self enrichment. And that was a very important factor when the age factor finally became uh, into play and we were losing more members than we were gaining, the balance was upset. And this led to the sad fading of our group. Uh, and of course, the dissolution of the group was further accelerated by a fear and vulnerability of our aging population during the Covid pandemic. And that led to a acceleration of the group, which is now even though individual members are still alive, uh, it no longer functions as a group.

William Friedman: So this is what I want to say in, in terms of why this group was important to me, why it was important to so many other people, and what what are the features of the group that made it so important? And as I close now, I want to turn to a topic which is newly being explored by science, and that is the current research, which finds a very strong correlation between interpersonal socializing, which our group offered, and the maintenance of mental health. Advancing age. All of us are getting older. there. All of us are concerned about the weaknesses in our mental health that come from that. And it now appears that the socializing that we did over the years may have helped many of us. Uh, the close personal bonds, which were fostered by SJS and these bonds were achieved by our numerous trips, especially when we went away as a group out of Seattle, and also by our array of of our gatherings in homes and other gatherings, uh, that we made available to our members; probably was a very important feature in keeping many of us going. And the number of events that we, uh, planned or had as part of our enrichment, uh, efforts. Uh, often were as high as a dozen in a single month, so.

Sara Glass: Wow.

William Friedman: Together at a remarkably high frequency. And, uh, even though we were unaware of this benefit, we probably did benefit from it. And this came even as we were just enjoying what we were doing at the moment. And because of these factors, uh, I think it's important that the story of SJS be preserved.

William Friedman: This might assist a future generation, uh, to have a group similar to us that might replicate our success. Now, there's no guarantee that there would be such a group or that there will be such a success. But in other words, in preserving our story, it serves as more than a historical for historical completeness. It may be a help to future generations, and I very much hope it will be.

Sara Glass: Uh, I can't imagine it wouldn't. It's so inspiring. And if you get a chance to read the history, which I did, I wanted to join. There's pictures and they're so vibrant. Everybody is smiling and it just looks like you're having such a good time. It was one from a park. Just a sunny day. It was. Must have been spring. There was the the cherry blossoms and a group walking.

William Friedman: One of our many trips was to.

Sara Glass: Oh, everybody was smiling and just. Yeah, wanted to be there. It was just truly inspiring. Um, and I also think that the care that you showed for one another, the friendships that you mentioned to sustain you. I have just loved learning about it. I really, really have.

William Friedman: Very happy to have an audience for this. And I hope, I hope by preserving some of the comments that I put

together and some of my recent thoughts. Will be available to.

Sara Glass: I agree, I agree. Thank you so much for sharing. Thank you. And we will wrap up our talk together. Um, I'm going to press the stop button, but you and I are going to keep talking a little bit, but I'm going to press stop. We'll stop recording. We want to just thank you for listening. Please make sure to read Bill's history of the SJS and look at the pictures. And thank you again so much, Bill, for sharing.

William Friedman: Okay. Happy to do it.

Sara Glass: Thank you.