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Oral History Interview

with

David Speck

Interviewer: Yahney-Marie Sangaré

Narrator: David G. Speck

Location of Interview: Virtual (Alexandria, VA and Martha's Vineyard, MA)

Date of Interview: 06/05/2024

Transcriber: Yahney-Marie Sangaré

Summary:

David Speck formerly served on the Alexandria City Council and in the Virginia House of Delegates. Speck recounts his perspective on the University of Virginia, racial tensions in Washington, D.C. and Alexandria after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his journey into politics.

Notes:

This interview was conducted for the "The Law of the Land, The Law of God: Blacks and Jews in Civil Rights Era Alexandria, Va" internship project in July and August 2024 by Yahney-Marie Sangaré. This interview was conducted on June 5, 2024 during the Alexandria City High School's Senior Experience. This is the first part part of this interview. The second part of this interview was recorded on July 9, 2024.

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General	Jewish Alexandria; 1950s, 1960s; Judaism; Ethical Culture Society; Civil Rights Movement; Interracial attitudes; Interfaith attitudes; Black-Jewish relations
People	David Speck; George Speck
Places	Alexandria, VA; Hammond High School; Saint Stephen's; Mud Town

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:00] Today is June 5, 2024. I'm starting this recording at 10:16 a.m., and then, name, age, date and location. So, would you like to go first; your name?

David Speck [00:00:17] David George Speck.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:19] Age?

David Speck [00:00:23] I had to think. 78.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:26] Location?

David Speck [00:00:30] Where I am right now?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:31] Yes.

David Speck [00:00:32] I'm on an island called Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:39] My name is Yahney-Marie Bostick Sangaré. I am 18 years old. It is June 5, 2024, and I am in Alexandria, Virginia. Okay. My first question is just where were you born?

David Speck [00:00:51] I was born in New York City. I lived there for six weeks before moving to Alexandria. My father was a physician, finishing his residency at Bellevue Hospital in New York. And right after I was born, he finished his residency and moved to Alexandria to start his practice, where he practiced as an OBGYN for 60 plus years. I'm not born and raised, but pretty darn close.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:01:34] What was your father's name?

David Speck [00:01:36] My father's name was George Speck. No middle initial. He was from Boston. Grew up in Boston. His heritage was Russian. We had family in Odessa. Jewish and Ashkenazi. He died 17 years ago now, at age 96 and a half, and [he] lived in Washington his last few years. He was a resident of Washington when he died, but until then, he was practicing and living in Alexandria.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:02:28] What did your mother do?

David Speck [00:02:32] My mother, initially, was just helping my father get his practice started. When I was four, we lived in Beverley Hills in Alexandria. My mother became very ill with cancer, and the initial effort to save her was an operation that, then and still now, is often referred to as an operation rarer than the disease. It was a hemipelvectomy, which is the amputation of the leg and half of pelvis. Although she had a prosthetic leg and was able to get around, working in a regular job was very difficult. But she certainly helped my father's practice when he was getting started; you know, managing appointments, scheduling things, which she would do from home. My father got her one of the very first cars that had an automatic transmission so that she could drive. We moved there [when] I was about five. And then we built the house right off Quaker Lane that was all in one level so that she was able to get around more easily. She died when I was ten, and [she] had three more major surgeries in an effort to get rid of the cancer. But that was unsuccessful. It was a long fight and a long decline.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:04:41] What was your mother's name?

David Speck [00:04:44] Doris. The maiden name was deFord. On my mother's side, my family goes back in Alexandria to the mid-1800s. They were business people who owned a tannery right on the river, at sort of the north end of the city. My mother grew up in Washington, and her family was largely North Carolinian, well before the 1800s, actually. I still have family in North Carolina that is part of my mother's family.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:05:46] So you spoke a bit about your mom and dad. Do you have any siblings?

David Speck [00:05:50] I have one sister, who's two and a half years older, and no other siblings. She had been living for many years in Ithaca and just recently became a Florida resident, and lives in Key West with her husband.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:06:21] What's your sister's name?

David Speck [00:06:23] Her name is Betsy. Middle name Ellen. My father remarried when I was just finishing high school, so when I was basically 18. The woman he married had a daughter my age, actually, within a couple months of each other. Her name was also, coincidentally, Betsy. Not short for Elisabeth, Bella. That was just one of those sort of odd coincidences. They both had the exact same name.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:07:03] How did you get along with your sister growing up?

David Speck [00:07:10] I guess we had sort of the normal sibling interaction. She would terrorize me, and then as I got bigger, I would get her. [*Laughter*] But we sort of coexisted. I mean, not having a mother probably influenced a lot of the way we interacted, but, you know, basically. Okay, we had a housekeeper from Jamaica that lived with us that my mother arranged before she died. So, there would be someone that would be familiar with us and the family that would be available for taking care of meals and keeping the house up and all that sort of thing. She lived with us for many years. She's still alive. She's in her 90s, and I visit her periodically.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:08:14] It was your mother's idea to have a housekeeper. Was that common in Alexandria at the time?

David Speck [00:08:27] No. I don't think so. Well. I don't know. That's a good question. You know, you're in a segregated community like Alexandria was, I don't know whether some of the African American women made themselves available. I know that a lot of them, you know, cleaned houses and that sort of thing. But I think in those days, most women, at least in the White side of town, were not working. They were homemakers. And so, there was less of a need for having someone that could provide childcare. But, my father's practice was quite demanding--He was the first OBGYN to actually open a practice in Alexandria. So as his practice became more established and was very busy, it was really important to have somebody there, to be home when I got home from school, or to make sure that I had breakfast if he was already at the hospital or something like that. But that's how I learned how to cook. She taught me how to cook. My sister had zero interest in learning how to cook. So,

when there were meals to be made, I was often the one that did them, because I enjoyed it. To sew, too, and iron and cook.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:10:17] What was her name?

David Speck [00:10:19] Her name was Icilda. But, only in later years did she tell me that her name was also Jelida. That was always confusing, because I always knew her as Icilda. There's a casserole that she used to make, so it was always called Icilda's casserole. And I have it every year on my birthday.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:10:55] So you spoke about it a little, but on your mother's side, your family have been Alexandra since the 1880s--

David Speck [00:11:03] No. Since the mid-1800s.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:11:04] Since the mid-1800s, thank you.

David Speck [00:11:06] 1850s.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:11:06] 1850s. Okay. And then on your father's side, he was born up north, yes?

David Speck [00:11:15] He was born in Boston. He grew up in Boston. He was one of five children. His father was a tailor. His mother died early too; not [when he was] as young as I was, probably when he was a mid-teenager, like 15 or 16. My father was very bright, but so were his siblings in different ways. But he was the only one that pursued college. His oldest sibling, his sister, was the first woman to become a registered stockbroker in Boston. This was in the 1940s. Women weren't stockbrokers. They were the girls in the back office. So that was quite an accomplishment. All his siblings were smart, but I think motivation to college was probably a little unreachable for a lot of people in those days. But my father started college at Harvard. He went to Boston Latin School, the oldest public boys school in the country, and then to Harvard. That was in 1928. He did quite well in his first year of college. Quite well as in all-As. Then the depression hit. His father was a tailor. There was no money. He asked for financial aid, and was turned down, because at the time, Harvard had a quota on how many Jews could receive financial aid. So, he left school [and] worked for seven years in different capacities. He worked for a can factory at one point, but after seven years, he was able to pull together enough money to go back to college. He went to the University of Michigan, because at that time, [at the University of Michigan] he could apply to medical school after his third year of college. So, obviously, he was anxious to catch up with lost time. But he did well there. He was Phi Beta Kappa after three years and got accepted to GW [George Washington University] Medical School because a lot of colleges, regardless of how good he was, wouldn't accept him even though he had all the requisite courses. He was accepted in GW. That's where he went to med school, and that's where he met my mother. They got married in his last year of med school. And, then he did his internship and residency. Then, due to a number of things that happened, he decided that he would start his practice in Alexandria. So. That was his story.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:14:54] Was your father's father also from Boston?

David Speck [00:14:58] No, he was from Russia. I didn't know him that well. Yeah, I can't tell you a lot about him, because I just never really knew that [him] well, and he died relatively soon in my young adulthood. My father was the surviving member of the family. He wasn't the youngest, but he was the last to die. There are still a couple of cousins. But most everyone is gone now. It wasn't a large family--The name Speck, it's German. But their name, when they migrated to America, was Speckovsky. It was shortened to Speck. You know, they do that a lot, shorten names. So, most of the people that I meet whose last names are Speck, there aren't that many, but they're not related. Very small family.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:16:26] Growing up, did you feel connection to any other cultural influence, be it just from the northeast, or going further back than that, than Alexandria?

David Speck [00:16:40] Not that much, actually. I was not raised formally in Judaism, even though my great grandfather was a founding member of Beth El Hebrew Congregation on Seminary Rd. And that was in 1859, although formally chartered--My great-grandfather's name was on the charter for Beth El, for the Constitution, I think they called it, in 1878. But my father, I think, was somewhat resistant to us being brought up formally in the Jewish environment. At least as far as joining a temple, going to temple, things like that. I think because of his experience growing up, where he was so focused. He went to a yeshiva, you know, he was formally, very formally, brought up that way. And, you know, where he grew up in Boston, in the Roxbury area, that was largely a Jewish neighborhood. So, you know, I think he resisted a lot of that because he had so much of it. My mother was the one that was the real iconoclast. I don't think she was brought up with much in the way of kind of Jewish tradition. And that was a lot sort of the result of the assimilation that Jews did in the South in those days. She went to Antioch College, and then eventually transferred to GW, but was probably a real liberal at a time when, you know, you had to be careful that if you were too liberal, you were probably going to be branded a communist. She certainly was unafraid to speak her mind, but she and my father made the decision that my sister and I would be brought up in Ethical Culture. Are you familiar with that?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:19:34] I'm not.

David Speck [00:19:37] It's still something that exists, but it's more of a religious experience that's based on ethics and morality. It was started by a Jew named Felix Adler, who was resistant to the doctrinaire elements of religion and wanted something that was welcoming to people that, you know, had some foundation that was not based on a deity as much as it was based on values and morality. And so that's where we went to Sunday school until she died. And then we kept going for a little while, but just kind of drifted away. The first real formal religious education I had, and I stretch to call it formal religious education, was my last two years of high school at St. Stephen's because, you know, there was this chapel and all that.

David Speck [00:25:38] Saint Stephen's, I'm sure you know, is now Saint Agnes also. It's a good school. The senior class was probably, I don't know, maybe 30, 35 students. But in that class, there were three Jews: me and two others. My first wife, the mother of both of my children, grew up in a Conservative temple in Philadelphia. So both of my children went to Hebrew school at Beth El [Hebrew Congregation], and both were bar or bat mitzvah-ed. So that exposed me to a lot more of the religious elements of Judaism. My second wife, still my current wife, we're about to be celebrating our 37th anniversary, she was the daughter of [Holocaust] survivors. She was brought up in New Jersey in the conservative temple. So, we were continuing to go to Beth El, and during some of the

holidays, there was a flier about learning Hebrew, and I could not read or speak Hebrew. And I didn't realize that it was sort of the first step for people that wanted to bar mitzvah-ed or bat mitzvah-ed. I was interested because all I could do was sit there when the services were in Hebrew, and I wanted to at least be conversant [in Hebrew] to some degree. So, I signed up, and there were nine people in my class: seven women and two men, including me. The women were all Jewish but had never been bat mitzvah-ed and wanted to, because that was not always that common. And the [other] guy was not Jewish, but had married a woman who was, and wanted to just be a little bit more knowledgeable. And [there was] me. And, so it led to being bar mitzvah-ed, for me, when I was 44. So I missed out on all the parties, but that brought me more involved in Beth El. We're not currently members of Beth El because we just haven't been that involved and active. But I've met a couple times with the rabbi there. I've known all the rabbis, and we've gone to services periodically, but not to the point that we would rejoin. But we're thinking about it, just because I think I'm at a point in my life where I'd like a stronger kind of spiritual foundation, so I'm interested in that. I don't know where I'm going with this. Keep asking questions.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:29:34] So kind of connecting to that, you spoke a little bit about your time at Saint Stephen's, which then was just Saint Stephen's. What was it like to grow up in Alexandria, before and after high school? Just in general, the environment for you?

David Speck [00:29:52] Alexandria was still in many ways as I was growing up a very segregated town. I mean, as recently as 1963, when I took the train to go to college, and you'd go into the train station in Alexandria and, you know, it's still broken up a little bit in terms of, "Why are there two different waiting areas?" But there was a waiting area for Whites, bathrooms for Whites, water fountains for Whites, and, for Coloreds Only, a waiting room, bathroom, water fountain, on the other side of the station. I don't want to say no one questioned that, but I think people were becoming, I'll use the current term, more woke about things like this. More sensitive to, "Why are we doing this?" But the Black community in Alexandria was very monolithic during that time. And politics, as a result, focused in a very monolithic way. When I first started being involved in politics, you campaigned by census tract. Because certain census tracts were clearly African-American, you campaigned differently there, [and] you had different campaign materials. And gradually, that changed. That much is pretty obvious. There was a relatively peaceful coexistence. I did not ever feel particularly estranged from any of the different communities. I don't recall much in the way of any antisemitism at all, because part of it was the long history of Jews in Alexandria. Both politically and from a business standpoint, [Alexandrian Jews] were very involved, and a lot of the old stores that you still see, aren't as many of them as there used to be, were all run by Jewish families. Hardware store: [Fagelson’s] Hardware, Hayman's Dress Shop, Bradshaw Shoes, all that. I mean, you know, King Street was the main street for shopping, and a lot of those stores were operated by Jewish families. By the same token, there was a Black movie theater. There were five movie theaters in Alexandria that were White only. And obviously that changed, but there were Black churches, Black schools, and they were all sort of focused in kind of the census tracts where those communities were. It's misleading to say, "That was just the way it was and we all got along," but I think as there became a stronger Black middle class, people began to recognize that not only were we going to need to work harder to get along, but that the way things used to be, in which it was sort of a coexistence, was not the way it should be. So that was a long awakening. But where I lived growing up was [where] some of the most important families in Alexandria [were] living, next door to Mud Town. When I say "Mud Town," do you know what I'm talking about?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:34:39] Would you like to explain it more?

David Speck [00:34:40] Okay. The houses where the high school is now: there's a group of houses on Quaker Lane and Woods Place that would be sort of on the western side of the high school property. That was a whole community living right next door. Among other people, one of the most important people in the desegregation movement in Virginia, state senator Armistead Boothe who fought the Byrd machine and massive resistance [lived there]. But they were homes that belonged to freed slaves. One of the things I remember—Maybe I was 9 or 10 at the time. The city banned privies, outdoor bathrooms, that were in Mud Town. And that was a big deal. You know, what you think is a big deal when you're 9 or 10 is probably not the same, you know, [as what] I would describe as a big deal now, but as a kid, I remember reading about that in the paper: that they could no longer use outhouses. What happened was that when the decision was made to build the high school, they needed to reclaim some land. They made an exchange with all those families to build those houses. I don't know if this is still the case, but they [the new houses] had to stay within the families that had lived there. So, there were no White people that lived in the houses. I don't know, there may have been 20 or 30 houses. They're still there. I don't know if the restrictions still exist. I know that because I was friends with some of the people that lived there, and they all were family members, descendants of the original freed slaves. And it was called a Mud Town because there were no paved roads in this little neighborhood.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:37:24] Sort of thinking about that, what other events mattered to you as a child that you remember growing up?

David Speck [00:37:39] Well, I did well in school. I went to MacArthur [Douglas MacArthur Elementary School]. I think that, not only after my mother died at ten, but [in] the years leading up to that, I was very much a product of my neighborhood. You know, all the other mothers sort of took on a surrogate role of some sort, keeping an eye on me. My father was fairly well known. It had the benefit of people accepting me in different ways. But it also meant that anytime I got into trouble, my father used to hear about it before I got home. You know, two people called him and said--You know, when I started driving-- "Saw your son today, he's driving a little too fast." I get home and my father would say, "Well, you know, so-and-so called and said you're driving a little too fast." Like, "Ugh. You can never get away from him." But [*Laughter*] it kept me out of a lot of serious trouble. The things that I remember most vividly were--The house we built, at the time, was sort of in the woods. And we didn't even have an address. The address was "Rural Free Delivery." It was a much sleepier town in those days. There was a pack of wild dogs that lived in the woods. I think that a domesticated dog escaped or something and began to raise this family of dogs that would live in the woods, and they would howl at night, and they would keep my mother up, who was obviously sick. My father couldn't get anybody to do anything about it. Nobody ever dealt with that. So my father took it upon himself to try to get rid of this pack of wild dogs. And he baited some meat with a strychnine poisoning. Made sure to tell all the neighbors, you know, "Keep your dogs locked up overnight." And, sure enough, some of the dogs came and ate it. So, it ended the problem, but one neighbor's dog got out and ate some of the poisoned meat and died. My father replaced the dog, but it made the news. You know, "Local doctor poisons dogs." I remember going to school, you know, kids teasing me about that, but I don't think it was terribly traumatic. It's just kind of an interesting thing. But the other thing I remember is that my father built a pool, in the ground, so that my mother could recreate in privacy. It was the first private pool in the city of Alexandria. So it seemed like, you know, "Your father must be a millionaire or something." He wasn't. But in those days, he was a doctor. Just made a decent

living. But the city had no regulations on private pools, because there weren't any. So, they kept coming up with more new rules about fencing and all that. I remember my father just going nuts about how he had to change the fence, because now they had new requirements, because more pools were being built. When I became involved in government, city council and all that, that's one of the things I thought about, you know, how regulations get made. The pool is still there, the house is still there. It's been rebuilt by new owners. I bought that house from my father. We lived there for about five years before we moved to Seminary Ridge with my wife. Every time I used the pool, I always thought about, you know, all the new regulations that get introduced. But generally, I mean, notwithstanding all the things that were going on in my life and the loss of my mother and, you know, years of really horrible surgery and everything, I look back now and wonder how my father managed to do a lot of things that he did. A very active practice, and still have time to, you know, help. I was a Boy Scout, and he was the president of the MacArthur PTA at a time when men weren't being presidents of PTAs, and somehow made time for things like that. I never appreciated how difficult that must have been, to do all the things he was doing. Yeah. So, I don't have a lot of exciting stories to tell you because it was--I don't know whether the word 'normal' would characterize my growing up. But there wasn't conflict within the community, the way it did become in the 60s. In the late 60s, there were two high schools: [Francis C.] Hammond and GW [George Washington High School]. It was sort of West End and East End. And it was like 1959 when Hammond was integrated, with two students, brother and sister, who complained that they shouldn't have to be driven to Parker-Gray High School when they could walk to Hammond High School. This was during the time when desegregation was first beginning to evolve. I remember their first day of school. My sister was at Hammond at the time. I was still in the eighth grade at Jefferson. You know, the sequencing then, for the White students, was a neighborhood school from 1st through 7th. No kindergarten. Eighth grade. The entire city went to eighth grade at Jefferson, which is now Jefferson Houston. And then you went to one of the two high schools. So my sister was at Hammond, and I was at Jefferson, and I remember my father driving my sister to school that morning, and then he was going to drive me and drop me off at Jefferson. The entire campus of Hammond was surrounded by police. Fairfax, Arlington, Alexandria, State Police and anybody, everybody, sheriffs. Because there were so many threats. And the biggest instigator of these threats was the leader of the American Nazi Party: George Lincoln Rockwell. He threatened to, you know--Nothing got to happen. But, you know, it was it was a very tense time because you didn't know what was going to happen. James and Patsy Ragland were the brother and sister that went there, and, you know, nothing happened. They went to school. Nobody really bothered them, but I think they were largely ignored. I don't think there was a lot of racial animus. They just kept a low profile, and gradually things just became more accepted. Took time. But those are the things you remember.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:46:21] How did you feel when you saw the campus of Hammond? Also, just in general, Rockwell comes up a lot. How do you remember feeling about that, if you thought about it as a child?

David Speck [00:46:37] Well, another good question. If I had to go back and think about it, part of it was kind of exciting, to see all these police around. And, you know, remember at that point, I was probably 13, maybe something like that. And then the other was, "Why? Why do we have to have all these police here?" But it was kind of interesting to see literally the campus surrounded. You know, this was all before the *Remember the Titans* element to it. Did you see the movie?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:47:23] I have seen the movie.

David Speck [00:47:26] I got to be very friendly with Gerry Bertier, because when I was in the the House of Delegates, there was a program to spend the day with someone with mobility issues. He was in a wheelchair, paralyzed in a single car accident the night of his sports banquet, actually. And so we spent the day together. This was before [the] ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act], you know, and I was having to figure out how to get over a curb, how to use a bathroom, and stuff like that while I was in a wheelchair. It was a terrific learning experience, and your eyes really open up when you're not just hearing about it but living it. Gerry and I, and his mother, who became a client of mine, became very friendly. So that really connected to the *Remember the Titans* story, because he was a key part of that story. Really neat guy. Sad.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:48:46] So you spoke a bit about the education system for the White children of Alexandria. What was your education like growing up, at MacArthur, and then at Jefferson; Did you go to GW or Hammond?

David Speck [00:49:00] I went to Hammond. I was on that side, yeah. It was good. I think that it was all good for me. I did well. Teachers, I think, always took a special interest in me because they knew that I'd lost my mother. And it wasn't until probably my sophomore year of high school that a lot of the things that I'd probably been suppressing in terms of grieving and all that, began to--Adolescence. And, I wasn't necessarily acting out, but I was definitely not living up to my potential. My father felt like I needed to make a change, and he looked at two places: Sidwell Friends [School] and St. Stephen's. Sidwell Friends wanted me to repeat a grade to come there. St. Stephen's did not. So, I think what really turned things around for me was to be at Saint Stephen's, in a smaller, all boys environment. I did well in high school. Got accepted to UVA [University of Virginia], which I probably wouldn't have now. But I think I got accepted to all the schools I applied to. Going to UVA was round two of backing out, and, by mutual agreement, I left UVA after two years and transferred to GW, where I got two degrees [and] worked in the faculty administration there. So that was that was the second big wake up call. And it was a good one. But my closest relationships are still all in Virginia (at uVA). GW was sort of a commuter school for me. I didn't commute, but it felt that way. I wasn't involved with anything in terms of student life. I was working, trying to catch up on lost credits and sort of work towards where I thought my career would be.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:51:40] When you went to secondary school, that would be around the 60s, right? At Saint Stephen's?

David Speck [00:52:02] I was class of '63. So I was there from '61 to '63.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:52:12] At Saint Stephen's and in that environment, also being right outside of D.C., that's also when a lot of things were happening, even in Washington. Do you remember conversations with your peers or just how you reacted to what was going on nationally or even locally?

David Speck [00:52:34] I don't really, because I think we lived in a somewhat insular environment. A lot of the things that really started to become more consequential, particularly in Washington, related to national policy, Vietnam War, all happened just as I was finishing high school. And UVA was the same, you know. UVA was a very insular environment. You know, if I'd been at Columbia [University], I might have felt more of a pull. But when I worked at GW, I was certainly involved,

because that was part of my job. Dealing with things like that. My doctoral dissertation was actually about dealing with student discipline at the college level, and creating judicial systems to work with students that were creating problems beyond just individual misbehavior.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:53:59] You described UVA as an insular environment. And you also described Alexandra like that. Would you want to speak more to what might have formed that feeling?

David Speck [00:54:11] I think we just did not get pulled into a lot of the national issues. I mean, I was a freshman in college at [University of] Virginia when Kennedy was killed. And I think for my generation, that was a defining moment. You talk to anybody in my generation, or relatively around that generation. They will tell you exactly where they were, what they were doing when they heard that Kennedy was killed. And, I think to some degree, that would also be a defining moment for another generation for 9/11. Is there anything in your life that you can think of that has happened that you can always remember where you were? That you thought?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:55:37] I think for my generation, it might be January 6th, 2021 or March 13th, 2020. So Covid-19 and the march on the capital. Or like the November 2020 election, maybe the 2016 election. But I don't think we've had anything of such major, at least in America.

David Speck [00:56:06] Yeah, I have had that conversation with other people because I'm always curious about it. I mean, from like, my father's generation, Pearl Harbor, everybody remembers when they heard that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. But, people have individual events that could be traumatic enough. They remember. But in terms of something that was a shared universal experience, there haven't been as many of them. Maybe there will be. Certainly, nobody's going to have trouble remembering the insurrection at the Capitol, but not in the same way. That probably has a lot to do with how we get our information, how we process it. But, you know, now with 24-hour news. You know, everything's breaking news. I don't think that's good for us.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:57:20] So thinking about Alexandria as you described. Who did you interact with growing up?

David Speck [00:57:32] Who did I what?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:57:33] Interact with. Socially, just in your day to day life, etc..

David Speck [00:57:51] Peers, a lot. You know, those are in the days when, you know, in the summer you get up in the morning, have breakfast, go out and meet your friends and, you know, run around acting crazy, playing baseball, you know, all that. But I lived in an interesting neighborhood. Are you familiar with the name Angus King, senator from Maine?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:58:14] Yes.

David Speck [00:58:15] Well, he grew up in Alexandria, and he lived around the corner from me. He was part of the group. We all played together. You know, you came home for dinner. So, what I remember, and clearly was not the same when my children were growing up--they're now 53 and 51. You know, we didn't worry about the stuff that everybody worries about. For my kids, it was similar, but not quite the way it was when I grew up. I mean, it was a safe, warm, comforting environment.

We were kids, you know, we did all the stupid stuff that, you know, sometimes resulted in a visit to the emergency room. But it was a normal childhood in the sense of how you lived your life. If you needed a haircut--it was 50 cents in those days--I rode my bike to the barber shop and got a haircut. And I always tell a story about the shoe store where I would get a pair of new shoes for the beginning of the school year. If you wanted the loafers, you had to have permission from your parents. You had to bring a note or your parents [had to be] with you to say, "Yes, you can have permission to wear loafers." Because they were considered to be not as good for your feet. It's funny, the things you remember.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:00:25] Do you remember what the shoe store was called?

David Speck [01:00:28] Bradshaw's. A friend of mine that was my age, and we went to high school together, his family owned Bradshaw's, and his last name was Blumenthal, and he was Jewish. We went to high school together. They owned the shoe store. You know who Cass Elliott is? Mama Cass?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:01:04] Yes.

David Speck [01:01:06] Do you know what her real name was?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:01:08] I do not.

David Speck [01:01:10] Ellen Cohen. And she lived on Skyhill Road, off of Janney's [Lane]. She went to GW. She was always just a beautiful singer.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:01:34] The boy whose family owned Bradshaw's; I know you said there were two other Jewish boys, right? Was that him who went to St. Stephen's?

David Speck [01:01:41] No. He stayed on the Hammond side. Now, what's interesting about St. Stephen's is that at the end of the school year, there were always a lot of big awards. The Citizenship Award. So, there were three Jews in my senior class, and we, the three of us, got every single award. The Citizenship Award, the Sportsmanship Award, and the Sacred Studies Award. So, the joke was, "Well, they'll never let another Jew into that school." But, it was just one of those weird things that happened. We were all good students. We were all really involved in stuff. Sports and being good citizens. And got all the awards. [*Laughter*] That was pretty funny, actually.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:02:33] How were people with that? Were there any issues?

David Speck [01:02:39] It never seemed to become an issue in one way or another. We all hung out together. As we got older, you know, we would go to parties together, would double date together. The first woman I ever dated who was Jewish was my first wife. And the second was my current wife. But, you know, I went out with girls without thinking a whole lot about religion.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:03:18] What was your parents' attitude towards that, your dad especially?

David Speck [01:03:25] I don't think he was too bothered by it, except that, you know, if it became a serious relationship, I think he wanted me to date someone Jewish. My father was anything but a big proponent of, you know, a lot of religion. But that was a little bit of a hot button for him. And I

didn't specifically seek out somebody who was Jewish to please him, it just sort of happened. At that point, I was at GW, finishing grad school and working. And, you know, GW has a lot of Jewish students, and I just happened to be introduced to one, and we ended up getting married. We were married for 18 years. With my current wife, Marcia, we've been married almost 37 years. When we had our 19th anniversary, I described it as a new personal record. [*Laughter*] She said, you know, "I think there's probably a more romantic way to describe your 19th anniversary." It's been good for both of us.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:04:48] Good. That's good. You spoke how you didn't necessarily grow up with Beth El, but with Ethical Culture.

David Speck [01:05:16] Sort of an interesting place.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:05:19] Was that based in Alexandria?

David Speck [01:05:21] No, it was national. Or global. It just happened that the Ethical Culture Society in that area was in Washington. So that's where we went on Sundays.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:05:37] How did you feel about it growing up?

David Speck [01:05:41] I didn't too much think about it, other than that it was something we did. And, I became more interested in it as I got older, and wasn't going to it, as to, you know, what was attractive about it.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:06:20] Okay. And then I know you mentioned that you weren't, at least growing up, as involved in Beth El, but outside of synagogue or outside of temple, did the local Jewish community gather in any way or have anything that had people know each other?

David Speck [01:06:34] Well, yeah. Judaism in the South, and Alexandria was certainly part of the South in those days, was very focused on assimilation. There was a period of time in Alexandria when the rabbi at Beth El had services on Sunday, because everyone else did. And, I don't know if that lasted that long, but I remember one of the previous rabbis was talking about that once when he was doing the sermon. [It] was about assimilation. So, there's no question that throughout the South, there was less about being Jewish from a religious standpoint and more about being in business and politics. I mean, Alexandria had a Jewish mayor [Henry Strauss] in 1900. And, I was not the first Jew to be elected to the General Assembly or City Council. I never remember there being an issue. I never remember anyone sort of suggesting that it might be hard to get elected or be successful in business because you were Jewish. So, if I was subjected to any overt antisemitism, I am unaware, or it was so minor in scope and nature that I didn't even retain it. That's where I think probably it may have been different for the African-American community. But, there were, until probably the early 60s, restrictive covenants on who could buy a house in certain neighborhoods, you know, a Black could live in a house as long as they were considered to be a domestic servant. But they couldn't buy a house. And that was true for Jews, too; Belle Haven, for example, was well known for not welcoming Jews in the country club or the neighborhood. There were sections of the city with the exact same thing, with restrictive covenants. It wasn't something that people particularly focused on. I hate to say that's just the way it was, but to some extent, that's just the way it was. Now, if you said to somebody, you know, "You can't buy a house because you're Black or because you're Jewish," I mean, you would see

headlines in the front page of the [Washington] *Post*. And that still happens. And that's what interesting to me, in this day and age, you still have people behaving that way.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:10:45] This sort of goes into what you've been talking about for a while, but, what sort of relationships did you see between Black and Jewish community members during like the 50s and 60s? And if you want, I can kind of delve more into what I mean by interactions.

David Speck [01:11:13] I don't think that was a whole lot in the fifties. Beginning in the sixties, Blacks and Jews began to develop more of an affinity for each other's circumstances and needs. But I think it was more oriented towards the African-American community. So they were becoming more the recipient of racial animus than Jews. The Jews had a natural affinity for people being oppressed. I mean, you know, the Holocaust wasn't that far removed from people's memory in the sixties. Do you know about the Shoah Project? Are you familiar with that? The Shoah Project? Steven Spielberg started it, but it was to have an oral history of the survivors of the Holocaust. Now, I think the University of Southern California is taking it over. But my mother-in-law was one of those who was interviewed for hours. Both my wife's parents were survivors of the concentration camps. Relatively soon, there will be no one who can give you a first-person account of what happened during the Holocaust. And, I think we're just--You know, like the 1619 project--I think we're just beginning to fully appreciate, you know, more than just, "Oh, that's interesting history," how oppressively dangerous the environment was for Blacks in the South in particular.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:13:31] Growing up, how do you recall feeling about kind of these processes of integration and civil rights that were happening around or in Alexandria?

David Speck [01:14:05] I think to some extent, the product of how I was raised made me more aware and sympathetic. I think I felt an emotional level more of what was happening than maybe some of my peers. I mean, we're seeing a lot of it now. You know, you hear these, you know, interviews with people on the street about Trump and integration, all that. It's not just disturbing. It's really scary. People talking about, in such a dehumanizing way, people that don't look like them. So, I think I was probably more sensitive to some of that just because of the way I was raised. I don't know what makes me flash on these things, other than I just talked to my wife about it pretty recently. I remember pretty young, getting my set of crayons for the year, you know, and usually it was like a 24 pack. Evey now and then, someone in my class would have the 48 pack with the built in sharpener. But I was always just curious about why there was a color called "Flesh." Because it wasn't. Not everyone was that color. And I don't say this to say, "Wow, I was really far more ahead of my peer group." I was just curious and, you know, my whole life is really about asking questions. But that always struck me as being kind of odd, and still does. So, I know I'm not giving you a great deal of depth to some of these questions, but I think that I'm much more aware of things that I wasn't as aware of growing up. Which is not a huge surprise as you get older. I'll be 80 in a year, and I think that's one of those moments where you suddenly say, you know, mortality is no longer an abstract. And, you're not at this point yet, but for my peers, the first thing we look at when we get our college and alumni magazine stuff like that, is the In Memoriam section. Who among our peers has died. That's kind of maudlin, but that's the stuff you think about when you get to my age.