

Oral Interview of Dorothy Fodor

Dorothy Fodor was born to Eleanor and Martin Kauchack on May 23, 1931 in Whiting Indiana. She had 5 brothers and no sisters. Thus, she was introduced to the differences in expectations of boys and girls in that era. Always a hard worker she began working at the age of 12. While she was young, she held jobs at various places: from a delicatessen to a truck stop.

Dorothy met Louis Fodor at a dance hall on St. Valentine's Day, and they married, roughly a year later, when she was 20. While, some might say she "took time off" to raise her 4 daughters, she would probably disagree. Dorothy has always emphasized education. Her daughters, Janet, Jane, Elizabeth, and Karen (aged 50-57,) have all pursued higher education. All of them have completed masters' degrees, except Karen, who is now in the process of completing hers. She has a very close relationship with each of her daughters, who all meet for Sunday dinners as often as possible – a tradition carried over from her and her mother Eleanor. She now has three grandchildren: Sarah (aged 26,) Rachel (26,) and Jeff (21.)

Dorothy earned her bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and, later, her Masters in Learning Disabilities and Education. For 18 years she worked as a school teacher at the local, Catholic, elementary school, and for 30 years she was involved in the rehabilitation of victims of brain injuries from accidents and strokes.

She is, and always has been, a very energetic, driven person. And she is a glass-half-full kind of woman; for, you are far more likely to see her with a smile on her face than not. She is down to earth and one of those people who genuinely wants to help and care for others.

On Growing Up

Dorothy grew up with 5 brothers. It was very apparent that there were different expectations of her than of her brothers. But, she never let that define her.

"Boys were expected to go onto college and earn a living for their family and girls were expected to stay home and serve the boys. And I ended up doing, but I didn't mind, the housework and helping my mom more. The boys didn't do much; they had sort of an exalted status. But it didn't scare me." She laughs and says, "I always said to myself I was better than they were, anyhow ... and I still am!"

On Duties

Dorothy is very high energy and definitely doesn't believe in being idle. She has "always enjoyed being busy, [and has] always kept busy." Between her family, schooling and her career, she has always filled her days. "Have I had any time to myself? Not really. Has there been any down time? I don't think so, I can't remember any."

When growing up she helped her mother out a lot around the house, and worked.

"I remember always making my brothers' beds, and just generally helping my mother with the cleaning and the cooking." But, as to whether any of these tasks really bothered her: "no, not really, I just did it."

Shortly after Dorothy married Lou they moved to Clarendon Hills, Illinois after he was laid off from his job at the steel mill. They moved into an old house on a big lot – a house they

inhabit to this day. The house required a lot of maintenance. She filled her day with painting the house, gardening, cooking, cleaning, and various other tasks.

She had twins (Janet and Jane) shortly after she was married, followed three and a half years later by Elizabeth and Karen in another three and a half years. “So, [her] days were pretty filled.” In addition to raising the children, she finished her undergraduate and, later, began to work full time.

She is a natural caregiver; she has always considered helping others one of her duties. Her mother, Eleanor, was a very independent woman and found the idea of a nursing home abhorrent. Dorothy helped keep her in her house through the end by arranging for nurses and assistants to help her. She regularly made the hour drive to see her and ensure she had everything she needed.

Remembering this Dorothy says, “She did not want to leave her home so there was nothing else we could do for her, except keep her in her home and keep her happy.”

Louis, her husband of over 50 years has had a string of health problems, lately. And she has been there with him through it all. Most recently, he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She now does everything required for the house, herself, and him.

On Education

She completed a little over a year of college before she was married, by working full time at the registrar. She always knew she wanted to complete her schooling. So she went back while she was raising her daughters. It took time, saving the money and only being able to take evening classes. And she went on to complete her masters while she was teaching

“I went to a community college and finished up my second year. Then I went to Elmhurst College to finish. It took me about six or seven years to finish my undergraduate. I was busy taking care of the home, and taking care of the children, and going to school.

Indeed, she sacrificed a lot for school. ‘Hobbies? No, I gave up. Before I went back to school I had belonged to a woman’s club and I tried to be more social with the neighbors. But when I started back to school, I basically gave all that up. I concentrated, I thoroughly enjoyed school. I found it intellectually stimulating.

After I taught for a number of years I went back for my masters. That also was challenging but I thought I needed it to advance my career. I gave up all hobbies and everything; I just didn’t have time for it.”

Later on, Dorothy and Louis sacrificed a lot to pay for the bulk of their daughters’ college. This was especially difficult due to the fact that, for a time, three of them were in college simultaneously.

On Jobs

One cannot help but be in awe of Dorothy’s work ethic. She began working when she was 12 babysitting. “I remember one person paid me 15 cents an hour. The big bucks were 25 cents an hour.” At 14 she started getting jobs at businesses. And, she still remembers the names and locations of them all.

And, while most people count down the years to their retirement, she could not be drawn away until she was 71.

When she was younger “they were all low paid jobs. My brothers could go to the steel mill and work a summer and earn enough for their year’s tuition in college. I could not do that. The pay wasn’t there. You couldn’t earn enough money to do much with it.”

“Originally I wanted to go into nursing, but [Eleanor] kind of talked me out of it. She didn’t have a clear idea of what the profession was. She thought it was demeaning. And, then, we didn’t have counselors to advise us.”

She decided to go into teaching to combine her family and career. “When I had children I was responsible for them. It was the most reasonable thing for me to do, to work at their school. It was close to home. So if they got sick or something I could run them home.”

She chose it for her children, but “I [she] did enjoy it”

“I enjoyed the comraderie, the teachers. I enjoyed the work and the children. In fact my bridge group is the teacher I worked with. At the workplace you make lasting friendships, which is nice.”

After she completed her masters, she began working for about 30 years for rehabilitation centers targeted at people with brain injuries from accidents or strokes. She worked about 11 hour days. “With my educational background I could do an educational assessment on the individuals and see [how] they were functioning.”

“[I enjoyed] the satisfaction of seeing people recover after a brain injury, seeing that you could make a difference. Really, there was quite a difference, as we would get them right out of the hospital. And we would provide physical therapy, occupation therapy, speech and language [therapy and,] psychological [support.]”

On Marriage

“I thought it would be a new adventure … and it was. I was living at home with my parents, and it wasn’t very exciting. Now, things are different, people have their own apartments and are able to work, and earn good money. But, I didn’t have the education, yet. So I was [still] living with my parents. It was a pretty controlled environment; there wasn’t a heck of a lot that I could do. So, getting married meant going off and living independently … and making my own choices.”

On Children

She tried to teach them typical, good values. “You find yourself being a lot like your mother. And you find that you are saying the same things your mother said.” But when asked if she asked Eleanor for advice: “Heck no! I did my own thing! But I would observe. I grew up with her. You just absorb things from your parents, and I tried to pass [those things] on to the girls.”

On Family

Family has always been very important to Dorothy. She regularly saw her parents after marriage, continuing the tradition of a big Sunday get together that began in her childhood. This tradition, largely, continues to this day.

“Every Sunday was a holiday. There was always a big meal growing up. She would make a couple of pies in the morning.” Dorothy fondly recalls numerous dishes and says: “she was a very good cook.”

As Eleanor aged she would drive out to see her. “I would go on Sunday and spend my afternoon there because she wanted to see the ducks. So we would go out and get the bread at the wholesale store and feed the ducks.” Afterward, Dorothy would often take Eleanor out to her favorite restaurant.

Dorothy mentions that Eleanor “was glue that held family together.” And, if you ask Dorothy’s children today, they say the same about her.

On Managing

“You just kind of keep going. Just manage to get up in the morning, and you just go and the best that you can. You try to be organized. Some things have to slide. Everything isn’t as neat and orderly as you like them to be.” “[I] Might have had drawers that need to be straightened, closets, or cupboards or things like that. You know, they weren’t up to par. You have to learn to let some things go, that’s all. You do what you can do, and you can’t get crazy about it.”

On Men and Women

Is it easier to be a man? “Oh yeah! At least it used to be. My mother’s favorite saying was: next time I’m born I am going to be born a man. Because, it was a woman’s duty was to serve, so, yah, it was [much easier to be a man.] I had 5 brothers and they were the kings. There was a great inequality, [though] it’s not as much anymore.

On Life

“You know what? I’ve had a good life.” She laughs and says “I’m happy to be living and breathing! I’m going to be 79 next Sunday, and I’m optimistic. I still want to do some traveling ... I still enjoy gardening, and cooking, and reading, and my friends, and eating! I’ve had a good life. It’s in God’s hands. You know, if he decides I’ve had enough, I’ve had enough. But, otherwise, I’m ready to [keep going] for a while.